

The Winner Takes It All

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The Winner Takes It All

by [alwerakoo](#)

Summary

“Your brother,” she says, making him focus for a moment. “It would be best if you picked him up as soon as possible, but if necessary, someone can stay with him until morning-”

“Sorry,” Wilbur cuts her off. “But I don't have a brother.”

Wilbur's mother dies and that's just the start.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Prologue

His mother died twelve minutes after midnight.

Or at least, that's what the calm, female voice on the other side of the phone tells him. A car accident, she explains, careless driving, slippery road.

Wilbur listens, looking out the window, at lights in some nearby apartments. And when she says the last 'I'm sorry for your loss', he answers in a calm, absent voice.

“Yes. That sounds like mom.”

The clock in the room shows one in the morning. His son is asleep behind the nearest door in a narrow hallway. Someone outside is playing loud music.

And his mother is dead.

“Again, I am so sorry,” the voice repeats.

She introduced herself, but he doesn't remember her name. He doesn't think it's important.

The woman talks for a moment, but he only stares at his own bare feet, as he runs his fingers over the sheets thrown onto his fold-out couch. He was just getting ready for bed.

His mother, whom he hasn't spoken to in the last five years, died twelve minutes after midnight, and Wilbur is really tired.

“Your brother,” she says, making him focus for a moment. “It would be best if you picked him up as soon as possible, but if necessary, someone can stay with him until morning-”

“Sorry,” Wilbur cuts her off. “But I don't have a brother.”

A moment of silence. The loud music outside the window had stopped a while ago, so maybe this loud rumble is really only happening in his head.

On the other side of the phone, someone flips a few papers and asks him to wait.

He can wait. He has time.

“Wilbur Soot?” The same monotonous, calm voice asks after a while. “Your brother, Tommy? He was born a year ago.”

Wilbur opens his mouth, then closes it again.

And with that one sentence, dies that little bit of hope he has had for the past five years. That if something happened, something big, if she needed his help in any way - she would call. Sent a telegram, wrote a letter, whatever.

But the number, written down under 'mom' in his phone, hasn't appeared on his screen in the last five years.

He always knew she is stubborn. And apparently, once again, he underestimated her ability in that aspect.

Was. His mother is dead.

“Your mother said, when they were taking her to the operating room, that if something happened to her, her eldest son would take care of him. That's you, correct?”

He swallows loudly. And really, the only thing he can say is:

“... Oh.”

Does Your Mother Know

Chapter Notes

if you want to listen to "does your mother know" by ABBA to this chapter then go ahead, but it will be quite a whiplash

Fundy was born on Wilbur's twentieth birthday. That's what he remembers from that day.

Not the cake that was prepared in advance, waiting in their fridge. Not the friends they planned to invite, or the few birthday cards he tossed carelessly on the kitchen table.

But just that moment, when he was holding him for the first time. Fundy weighed less than two kilograms, was born too early, and in his hands he was so tiny, so fragile, he was afraid that any sudden movement could hurt him.

And although at that moment, Wilbur was so incredibly scared, his arms would never forget that, they way he held him, his child, his little boy.

He didn't care about the weird looks exchanged between the nurses, a few awkward jokes, and the fact that the new mom, lying on the hospital bed, seemed to be looking at them with cold, distant eyes.

On his twentieth birthday, Wilbur became a father.

And Fundy was the apple of his eye, his little baby, for who he would do absolutely anything.

The same child, who's now staring at him now, rubbing his eyes with his palm.

“Dad?”

Rays of the rising sun shine through the window in the room, and although the clock on the wall shows only six o'clock, Wilbur is already dressed, tying laces of his shoes.

He didn't get up early today. He didn't have to, because he never went to sleep, staring in silence at the wall for a long time, not really thinking about anything.

And then he got up and made himself coffee. It was cold by the time he actually started drinking it.

Wilbur kneels down to be on the same level with his tired, half-asleep son, ruffling his hair.

“Hey, kid. Why are you up?”

“Where are you going?” Fundy hugs his old plushy tighter, resting his chin on its head.

Wilbur doesn't answer for a moment.

He probably should tell him right now. For as long as the wound is still fresh enough, and the shock still so intoxicating, that it doesn't hurt to scratch it. He should tell him.

His five-year-old son, who lost his grandmother hours ago.

But Fundy doesn't even know he ever had a grandmother.

It's six o'clock on a Sunday morning, he can hear the first sounds of the town waking up outside his window, and he's very, very tired.

"I have to do something," he says. "Our neighbor agreed to look after you."

His mother is dead.

And Fundy won't find out about it. Not now, not today, not when he's wearing his yellow pajamas, hugging a plush fox in his arms, while he's still so *small*.

Fundy grimaces.

"But I don't like her! She smells funny and always gives me licorice. And I don't like licorice."

Wilbur smiles stiffly.

"I know." He ruffled his red hair one more time. "I will be back soon."

When opening the door with the keys he got from the owner, the first thing he notices is the smell. Heavy perfume, mixed with the remnants of old food, abandoned somewhere on the counter.

And the inside looks like it could belong to someone, whose life suddenly changed completely, and no one was really prepared for it. Old dresses and skirts on the floor, always reminding him of the fact, that despite the constant exhaustion on her face, his mother was once a young woman.

Was.

A few empty photo frames, still wrapped in a foil. Brushes and make up on the bed, left messy, in a rush. And a general thick layer of dust settled on almost everything, dirty windows, few stains on the carpet.

And in between all this feminine mess and chaos - a cradle. In the corner of the one room, right next to the TV.

And to his surprise, Wilbur discovers that it's almost completely clean. Like it's the only object in the apartment, that looks like it was taken care of. Toys carefully collected into one container, a milk bottle by the sink.

Wilbur casually, almost automatically, runs his fingers over the plastic, cloth-covered frame of the cradle. And he looks down at the blue blanket that belonged to a small child, who lost his mother today. Just like him.

Before giving the keys back to the owner, apart from the cradle, he only takes a few items, in two small, cardboard boxes.

A photo album, that his mother gave up on filling out years ago. A few old notebooks with recipes, emergency numbers, names of people he doesn't remember. A few toys, while trying to remember where he stuffed Fundy's old rattles.

And a pair of long, gold-plated earrings which remind him a bit of warmth and childhood.

As he packs the last box into the car, receives more condolences, to which he only nods, slamming shut the broken lock of his trunk.

When he sees him, his first thought is not, that someone is just giving him a one-year-old baby he's supposed to be taking care of now.

Not that this very child is supposed to be his brother, which he didn't even know existed until a few hours ago, when he found out through a phone call with a complete stranger. Or that this little baby that someone handed over to him, wrapped in an old blanket, recently become an orphan.

Because his first thought, is how much he looks like *her*.

Pale, blue eyes and blonde, almost golden hair. He resembles his mother, *their* mother so much, that for a moment he just stands there, silently staring at him.

"It's good that you're here," sighs the woman who put Tommy into his arms.

Her hair is a mess, dark spots under her eyes, but she looks at the baby with almost impossible and sincere compassion.

"He cried all night. Poor little thing..."

Now, however, the kid clearly seems too exhausted, because apart from a soft whine, he makes no sound, slowly closing his eyes.

"I ..." Wilbur says suddenly, soft, in a strange voice. "I can't take care of him. He's..."

He's so much like *her*, so small, and a few days ago, he didn't even know he existed.

Didn't know about the cradle in his mother's, their mother's apartment, about the fact that a year ago, a few hours from his home, a little boy of the same last name was born.

And a few hours ago, she died, making them orphans.

Tommy, who cried all night, waiting for his mom to come over and put him back to rest. And Wilbur, her second and eldest son, to whom she hadn't said a word in the last five years.

His legs buckle under him, the woman quickly takes the baby from him, and he lets her, as he sits heavy on the chair. She asks if he wants a tissue, water, but he just shakes his head, putting his face in his hands.

The stranger, whose name he already forgot, says something to him, but her words are tangled up in a single, meaningless string.

And suddenly he's standing on his feet again, suddenly he takes his jacket from the chair, signs some documents.

He does automatically, mechanically. In a daze.

It's only when he gets into his car, smelling the familiar scent of air freshener and cologne, that he

allows himself to lean against his seat.

And cry, for the first time that day.

Quietly, to not wake up the baby, sleeping in his arms.

Fundy greets him at the door, running up to him and wrapping his arms around his waist.

“Dad!”

Their neighbor, an elderly woman in a slightly too colorful dress, emerges from the room into the hallway. She looks clearly displeased, but when she opens her mouth to say something, she freezes suddenly, staring at the bundle in his arms.

Her face sharpens, hands resting on her hips. Fundy, as if just realizing something is wrong, steps away from him, lifting his head up.

“Mister Soot,” she begins sharply, and Wilbur winces.

Although he's an adult, and usually there's no real trace of that little kid who was afraid of grown-ups, hiding his face behind his mother's skirt, there's something about this woman that always managed to wake up his deepest, former fears.

“If you think I have nothing better to do, then take care of your kid on a Sunday morning, and without any prior announcement, then you are very wrong.”

“I'm sorry. I can pay...” he starts, but she immediately shuts him down with her hand.

Suddenly, there's something soft, like compassion on her face, mingled with a complete loss of faith in any improvement.

“I don't want any money,” she adds in a lower voice, glancing sideways at his apartment for a moment. “But for the love of God... Is it so hard to just call the day before?”

My mother is dead, he wants to answer.

But he doesn't.

Because Fundy's fingers are still holding onto his pants, and this woman, who did so much for him (despite all her nosiness), doesn't need to know about it.

“It was an emergency. I'm really sorry.”

The woman sighs, rubbing the tip of her nose with her fingers. Fundy reaches out, trying to grab the end of the blanket. Wilbur, instinctively, gently pulls his hands away.

“And what? You're bringing random kids here? Again?”

Wilbur tightens his lips.

“It's not my kid,” he says coldly. “Thank you again.”

His last words echo without a hint of gratitude, and when the front door closes, only Fundy whispers a soft: 'bye'.

They're left alone before Wilbur kneels down, letting his son take a look at the bundle in his arms. The boy's eyes widen as he leans over him.

“What is this?”

Wilbur smiles faintly.

“Not *'what'*, *'who'*. This is Tommy. Your uncle.”

Fundy frowns, clearly trying to figure out something in his mind. The little boy in Wilbur's arms turns slightly in his sleep.

“But he's... small. And uncles are big. I saw in a show.

Wilbur laughs softly, ruffling his son's hair.

“Yes, you're right. This one is exceptionally small for an uncle. He will stay with us... For a while.”

He adds the last part uncertainly, staring at Tommy's sleeping face.

It's been a while since, since there was a cradle by his bedside.

Later that night, he's woken up by the sound of a crying baby.

The room is completely dark, and although he's not fully aware of it, his body moves by itself, automatically, in this learned and unforgettable habit.

With a small movement of his hand, he turns on the lamp standing by the sofa and then crouches by the cradle, leaning over it. And only then, as if woken from some sort of daze, he realizes he has no idea what he's doing.

From the moment he was born, Fundy seemed to fit into his arms almost perfectly, as if they were made for just that. To keep close his greatest, priceless treasure.

When he picks up Tommy, his hands are shaking, he suddenly doesn't remember how to turn them, and the boy starts crying even louder.

“Oh no, no... It's gonna be okay.” He awkwardly rocks the baby, looking back at the door to his son's room.

Tommy doesn't seem at all reassured by these words.

Only after a few minutes of soft humming and muffled words, the crying quiets down a bit. But it seems to Wilbur, that it has more to do with Tommy just getting tired again, than anything he did.

Tommy looks at him with large, teary eyes. But there's no trace of understanding, that trust he remembers from Fundy in them.

For little Tommy, Wilbur was a stranger who picked him up a few hours earlier, and took him to a

completely unknown place.

Away from his mom.

Wilbur takes a deep breath.

With his free hand, he pushes back the blond hair from his forehead, listening to his soft cries.

“You miss your mom, huh?” He asks softly.

His voice breaks and he realizes that his eyesight is blurry, and he quickly turns the baby in his hands, so that he can't see his face.

He bites down on his lip.

Tommy is less than a year old, with familiar bright eyes, the same last name, and he really, really wants his mom back.

The funeral is held a few days later, and Wilbur arrives late.

He would like to say, that it was Fundy's fault, who was extremely reluctant to go to his kindergarten that particular morning.

Or his neighbor, who called him at the last minute to tell him, she wouldn't be able to help him.

Or the traffic in town, because of course everyone remembered they had to be somewhere, just when he was sweating behind the wheel in his rented, black suit.

But in reality, he parked near the chapel twenty minutes early, staring blankly ahead.

Tommy, in his carrier on the seat next to it, sleeps deeply, only turning slightly from time to time.

His neighbor is sick, his mother is dead, and Wilbur brought a baby to a funeral.

He hides his face in his hands.

When more than half an hour later he walks into the chapel, someone pauses for a moment, but Wilbur doesn't even look up at them, quickly sitting down on the nearest bench.

The coffin between the pews seems too expensive, too polished to fit the woman lying inside it.

In a blue carrier, with a colorful blanket, Tommy seems so impossibly detached from all their present reality, which doesn't help with his beating heart at all.

Blood pounds in his ears, he doesn't understand words coming from anyone's mouth and the only thing he can hear is *her* name, repeated over and over again.

A name he heard more times in the last few days, than in the previous five years.

There are only a few people inside. Nobody's crying.

Or at least he thinks so, because their faces blur strangely, merge into one dark mass of bowed

heads, clasped hands.

Nobody, except for Tommy. Who wakes up crying halfway through the ceremony, and Wilbur takes him outside, almost relieved as he steps into the fresh air.

Several heads turn towards them, but people immediately look away, their faces softening with understanding or compassion.

On this one day, Tommy can cry as loud as he wants. After all, he just lost his mother.

The rest of the ceremony merges into a single string, and one moment he looks at the coffin, in the other he puts down a few cheap flowers, which he had bought quickly an hour earlier in the store.

With other, decorated bouquets, they look pale and faint, as if they were about to wither at any moment.

My son doesn't know you existed, he thinks.

And all he can hope for at this moment, is that this little boy in his arms won't remember any part of this gloomy funeral where nobody cried.

That in a few years, the image of his mother would blur in his mind, leaving only a faint, warm memory.

That he would soon stop calling out for her.

He starts walking to his car, accidentally bumping into someone.

“Oh! I'm sorry-”

Blond hair flashes somewhere in the corner of his eye, but Wilbur doesn't even turn back.

His legs are stiff, his feet strangely numb, and he suddenly remembers how tired he is.

Slipping Through My Fingers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Only a few days later, he starts to feel the weight that has just been put on his shoulders.

It's been a long time since he last warmed up powdered milk or pushed a stroller, and his arms ache constantly.

And Tommy just *won't stop crying*.

Maybe it really is just nostalgia and paternal love, distorting his picture of reality a bit. And maybe, right, Fundy has never been, and still isn't, an innocent little angel who's always polite, quiet, and calm, and invents a cure for cancer in his spare time.

But still, he's almost certain that Tommy cried more in the last week, then Fundy did throughout his whole life.

And for the first time in many years, Wilbur is seriously considering returning to that damned chapel from a few days ago, and simply praying on his knees to god for forgiveness. Any kind of god.

Because really, this must be some form of a divine punishment.

He hadn't slept well since he arrived at his house, and neither did Fundy. And the sight of his kid, dozing off and yawning at the dinner table in the morning, would probably make him feel worst, if he wasn't barely standing on his feet himself.

When Fundy was younger, he told himself this over, and over again. Wiping away the milk spilled on the floor, scraping the stains from children's clothes, carrying the stroller up the endless staircase: *never – for the love of god - never again*.

In those moments, maybe god didn't really love him that much, but still. A promise is a promise.

Which he was now forced to break. At least this time, though, it's not his fault.

“Oh, come on, shut up...” he mumbles under his breath, rocking the baby in his arms

As if on cue, Tommy cries even louder.

Wilbur lets out a soft groan. His legs hurt from kneeling, but he doesn't trust that if he gets up, he won't just fall over immediately; his feet are numb.

“What do you want? You didn't want to eat.”

He doesn't know whether he actually expected the boy to answer him, or if he has simply stopped thinking logically from all the exhaustion. But to his amazement, Tommy suddenly becomes quiet down, as he looks up at him with wet eyes.

And suddenly he feels something in his throat tighten, the image in front of his eyes blurred a little as he blinks quickly.

“My mom is also dead, you know? You're not special.”

His voice cracks, he's just really, *really tired*.

That night, Wilbur falls asleep on the floor, the baby in his arms, his cheek against the wall.

The boy he holds so close, so carefully, even in his sleep, is the last thing he wanted.

Never again, he promised.

The next morning, Wilbur wakes up with a numb face, feeling like the cruelest man in the entire world.

He's just a baby, he reminds himself as he glances at Tommy, who has finally fallen asleep in his arms.

But after that time, when he just felt numb, as he wandered mindlessly around his apartment, putting on a fake smile, all the frustration that boiled up inside him from the moment his phone rang that one, long, sleepless night, it finally hits him.

His mother is dead.

His mother is dead and left behind a child, he never knew existed. She gave birth to a boy with the same surname, same hair and eyes, who now kept him awake for over a week, and then she just died.

From the cardboard box under his bed, which he already managed to almost forget about, he finally digs out an old, broken phone.

He turns him for a moment in his hands, while enjoying the momentary silence, as Tommy falls asleep, clutching his little fingers around the blue blanket. He runs his thumb over the purple case.

She used to say she hates that color. He still remembers how she winced sometimes, looking at dresses and blouses in stores, putting nail polishes back on the shelf.

But apparently - people change.

It takes him a whole minute to guess the password (maybe they never really change that much, though), and he spends the next half an hour looking through the entire device. Reading all messages, contacts, recent searches in the browser.

He pauses for a moment, looking at the gallery, because right next to a slightly blurred photograph of Tommy, he notices himself. About twenty years younger, grinning and showing all his missing baby teeth.

He remembers this picture, from the beginning of the photo album, which now rests next to him, in a single, cardboard box.

He stares at it for a moment.

Then closes the gallery.

Ultimately, he finds nothing.

“Her oldest son,” the woman on the phone told him. And maybe, he still wanted to believe she meant someone else.

That in a few days, someone will appear on his doorstep, smiling brightly and informing him that this whole thing was just a big misunderstanding; some other man with the same surname, because, as he now knows, keeping her other kids a secret, was very much in her style.

And although he realizes how naive this all sounds, no one can blame him for at least trying to search for some kind of clue.

Or maybe for someone with a different surname, a living god knows where, who may not even know, that there's a boy named Tommy, who recently lost his mother.

But he finds nothing, no contacts with the extra hearts, no couple photos, no messages.

In fact, the phone feels downright unnaturally empty, as if someone hasn't used it very often, or has recently completely wiped it clean.

It does sound like her, to start with something as stupid as a phone, to give herself the illusion of a fresh new start, but that doesn't make him feel any better.

When a few hours later, he holds a warm bottle in one hand, keeping Tommy close with the other, he says softly:

“You don't know who your dad is, do you?” He sighs, shifting his numb wrist. “Well, we have something in common.”

He laughs softly, although the joke is neither particularly funny nor clever, and only fills him with sudden bitterness.

No newly discovered family member shows up on his doorstep. Not in the next few days, nor the next week.

Wilbur is her mother's oldest son, and her youngest child sleeps in a cradle next to his bed.

And really, he's just done with everything.

He's fed up with his kid, who constantly runs into their house with his shoes on, leaving wet traces behind.

He is fed up with the baby, who doesn't let him fall asleep at night, and requires more attention than there are hours in a day.

And he's fed up with their, neighbor who gives him a dirty look and feels the need to lecture him every time she sees him.

Because yes, they're doing just fine, and no, he doesn't need any help at all, he has everything under control, he's just a little tired, he just needs to rest for a while, and why won't this kid just *shut up*-

“Fundy!”

He leans out the window, looking down.

A small, weathered patch of grass, with one, sad swing, surrounded on all sides by blocks of flats, form a time when no one had the money nor the want to build them, was always the most popular place with all the local children.

Although during the first few months of living here, the constant outside noise seemed unbearable, especially in the summer, eventually it blended in with all those other background noises, that he stopped paying attention to.

Fundy, however, must have liked all this racket, because recently Wilbur saw him through the window in his room, more often than in their apartment.

(He tried to suppress the thought that he, too, would very much like to avoid being home right now.)

The boy looks up, smiling and waving his hand at him.

“It's almost your bedtime, come on.”

Fundy puffs his cheeks, as he looks around at the other kids, who now seem to be arguing about which of them kicked the ball last, and who should go get it.

“Five more minutes!” He yells back quickly, nudging one of the boys on the shoulder and saying something, too softly for Wilbur to understand.

But he's almost certain he clearly heard *'Whatever, just shut up'* in response.

“Fundy, we talked about this.”

Fundy crosses his arms, staring at the ground. He doesn't talk for a moment, but doesn't move either.

“Fundy,” he repeats, sharper this time.

His legs are numb from standing, and at the same time afraid that if he sits down, he might not be able to get up until the next morning, he nearly burned dinner three times, and Tommy fell asleep only an hour ago.

And he's very, *very* tired.

Only after a moment, Fundy looks at him again, his face clearly disappointed.

“But dad...! Come on, I just-”

Wilbur takes a deep breath, his fingers clutching around the window frame.

“Fundy.”

In the corner of his eye, he sees water boiling over the pot onto the stove, Tommy shifts in the cradle, wincing.

“Four more minutes!”

“No, Fundy-”

“Really! I'll be back soon, just-”

“Fundy, for fuck's sake!” He suddenly raises his voice; the boy flinches, and a few others cut off their argument, glancing at him a little fearfully. “Home. Now!”

And without waiting for a reply, he slams the window shut, as he steps back into the room.

Two minutes later, Fundy shows up, taking his shoes off before even coming inside, head hung low, and quickly sneaks out to his room.

Wilbur rests his elbows on the table, hiding his face in his hands.

That night, when Tommy falls asleep, Wilbur takes his phone out of his pocket.

Remnants of the dinner he ate alone, or rather - turned the food over on his plate for half an hour, still lie unwashed in the sink. His clothes still where he left them, tossed on the floor next to the couch.

The whole room is, generally, *a mess*, and Wilbur quickly types into his search bar, the thought that haven't left his mind for the past two weeks.

He clicks the top link, quickly scrolls over the text, not fully understanding anything from it, finally finding the phone number. His eyes sting.

He copies the numbers but doesn't enter it anywhere, still staring at the page. His ears pound, his hands tremble, and his heart beats heavily against his chest. His thumb moves across the screen, not really knowing what it wants to do.

All he knows, is that he's tired. So tired and fed up with everything, and he doesn't want any help, he just wants this all to end, to *disappear*-

Tommy starts to cry.

That's the thing that wakes him from that strange state; he gets up quickly from the couch.

And when he leans over the cradle, he hesitates for a moment, just a moment. Then, with a trembling hand, he pushes back Tommy's blond hair, his fingertips touching his face.

And then Tommy reaches out to him.

Moving the baby in his arms, holding him close, feels so *small*, suddenly. Wrapped in a blue blanket with little sheep on it, holding Fundy's old toys.

He swallows.

“Oh, Tommy...”

The boy doesn't answer.

He's warm, and so impossibly *small* and *tiny*-

He's barely one year old, and attended his own mother's funeral. He looks so much like *her*.

Holding the baby close, he looks back at his phone, at the homepage of the local orphanage, still

visible on the screen.

And suddenly, it hits him.

That he won't give him back. Not to any 'missing' older brother, not to any stranger, or anyone who would try.

Maybe it's not because when he looks at him, his thought is '*my brother*'. Maybe not because he found some outlet for all his love, which he had too much for one child. Maybe not because even the thought of that made his heart ache.

Not yet.

But simply, because Tommy didn't deserve it.

He didn't deserve to be an orphan, before he could even walk. To be tossed from hand to hand, like some kind of inconvenience, an obstacle in the procedure.

He didn't deserve his anger and frustration.

Tommy's just a kid. Who now smiles, stretching out his little hands towards him.

He leans down, letting him touch his face.

It's hard to say that that specific moment changed a lot, in the long run.

It changed something in Wilbur, who now looked at Tommy a little differently, held him a little closer, more gently, guided by some new, inner need rather than just pure instinct.

But it definitely didn't change how much Tommy cried, nor those sleepless nights, his aching legs and back. The tired look Fundy gave him at breakfast.

Although Fundy was easily bribed with ice cream the next morning, and didn't seem to hold a grudge for long, Wilbur still felt so much guilt, as he looked at his son.

It wasn't the first time he had ever raised his voice at him, but for some reason, it left the biggest mark on him.

His son didn't deserve all the anger he felt towards his mother, the whole world, and everyone around him, and neither did Tommy.

And that's what he keeps reminding himself, when he wakes up again in the middle of the night, when he can't stand on his own feet in the morning, when he's wiping down the wet stains from the floor of their cramped hallway, as he opens his almost-empty wallet.

As Fundy tugs on his sleeve again, almost knocking the bottle out of his hands.

“Dad. Will you read to me? You promised!”

Wilbur holds his breath for a moment, closing his eyes.

The lightbulb in the room burnt out two days ago, so now the whole room is only lit by a lamp

above the stove and a candle on the table.

In the weak light, Fundy's red hair appears darker, almost brown. He quickly looks down at the book he's clutching under his arm.

“I already told you, just give me a minute. I have to feed Tommy,” he answers.

Fundy purses his lips as he stares at the baby in the cradle.

“When is he leaving?”

Wilbur freezes for a moment.

He stares at his rough, dry hands, and his son looks at him expectantly.

His son, who doesn't know that he ever had a grandmother, who died, leaving her youngest child behind. And he's not sure if he'll ever find out.

He puts the bottle down on the table, crouching down to be at his height. He rests her hand on his shoulder.

“Tommy is staying with us, Fundy. Forever.”

The boy looks at him for a moment, as if expecting something more. Maybe explanation, maybe for him to say it's all just a very unfunny joke.

Wilbur doesn't say anything else.

Until Fundy looks at the cradle one more time, and asks, in a quiet, confused voice:

“But why?”

Wilbur's hand tightens on his shoulder. Because right now, he should just tell him. Like he should have told him when he was on his way to the funeral, when he brought Tommy to their house, when he ended that phone call.

Deep down, he knows Fundy is too young to fully understand it. To share his pain after losing someone, when his few memories of her blurred out in his mind long time ago.

Just like last time.

And maybe, that's why it's so hard for him to say anything.

Fundy speaks up again, however, clearly not waiting for an answer.

“He's loud. And makes a mess. And the guests shouldn't be loud or leave a mess, you said it yourself.”

“Tommy's not a guest. He's your uncle.”

Fundy holds the book close to his chest.

“But I don't want him.”

“Fundy-”

“I don't want him here, he's-”

“Fundy!”

The boy immediately closes his mouth, and Wilbur takes his hand off his shoulder, running it over his face. He pinches the bridge of his nose between two fingers.

“Go. I’ll be there soon.”

He slowly gets up, when Fundy disappears into his room.

Tommy starts to cry. He always does.

And when Wilbur is finally able to stretch his sore arms, while putting him back in the cradle, he glances at the clock on the wall.

A few drops of wax from the candle landed on the table, leaving pale marks on the wood, and Wilbur lost about half an hour of his life.

He curses softly under his breath, as he stands up and stretches his numb back.

The light is still on in Fundy’s room; blue light from his bedside lamp fall softly from under the door, to the narrow hall.

He quickly walks up to the door, opening it slightly, so that the creaking doesn’t wake Tommy up.

“Hey, Fund-”

And suddenly he stops, staring at the bed against the wall of the room. Fundy, curled up under the sheets, holding a thin book to his chest, is already asleep, huddled against the pillow.

Wilbur just stands there for a moment, his hand frozen on the doorknob.

He’s standing in his son’s room, where a blue bedside lamp casts a faint light on a variety of stickers, posters, scattered toys and unfinished, colorful drawings on a small desk.

His son, who fell asleep waiting for him.

And in Wilbur’s heart, there’s that familiar, sharp ache.

Memories of his own mother, the long sleeves of her blouses, empty words, falling asleep by the ajar door with an unfulfilled promise echoing through his mind.

When he thought about her, even now, he still remembered her warm voice, how he laughed when she gave all the book character different accents, how her stories always felt alive. And how one day, she just stopped.

His legs are shaky, as he walks up to the bed. He strokes his son’s red hair, freckled face; he leans in to kiss his forehead.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers softly.

In that room, still full of expectations, trust and childish hope.

If Fundy was angry at him in any way, it all disappears immediately the next day, when Wilbur surprises him with a brand-new toy. And he grins, as he turns the ball over in his hands.

And maybe, that smile was worth the price after all.

Maybe.

Because four months pass somewhere in the back of his head, quickly, too quickly, and when he opens the mailbox, he is greeted by a familiar envelope.

But he doesn't open it until a few hours later, after wiping the same spot on the floor four times, trying to ignore the tight feeling in his throat, and the thoughts in the back of his head.

But when he finally tears the envelope open, he just stares at it in silence for a moment.

His hands shake, as he looks at his wallet, at the nearly empty jar in the back of the cupboard above the stove, where he always kept spare money.

Really, he should have expected it. And maybe in a way, he was.

That thought came to his mind when he first found out about her death, when he took Tommy home, every time he stood at the checkout at the store.

And yet, he always pushed it, as deeply, as far away as possible, not wanting to shorten this brief moment of blissful ignorance.

And now, he's staring at his bills, that have fallen from his trembling hands, onto his lap.

He just runs his hands through his hair for a moment, his fingers tightening around it, feeling his breath quicken; blood pounds in his ears.

Suddenly he stands up, with a quick, nervous steps, walking the length of his entire, tiny room, which was also his kitchen, living room and everything else it needed to be. He bites his nails, cursing softly under his breath, turning around on his heel.

His thoughts shift in his mind, too fast for him to grasp any of them.

Loans, his neighbor, his car, his-

He stops suddenly, as his gaze falls on the cardboard box, still tucked under the couch.

Eventually one final thought stands out and Wilbur doesn't like the sound of it at all.

When he leaves the pawnshop, his wallet is much thicker, and his heart much heavier.

On his way there, he repeated to himself, that it's necessary, and he doesn't care at all, and what is he even so worried about, but he hesitated for a long time, before even walking into the shop itself.

And yet his mother's earrings, wrapped in a tiny paper bag, landed on the counter.

Although it seemed to be the only logical option, a necessary sacrifice even, for a moment, the money he received felt like nothing in comparison to the way the gold on the earrings glistened in the rays of the sun, streaming through the window.

He still associated them with something old and warm, with some distant memory that he couldn't quite place. Even when he was putting them into someone else's hands.

When he was selling, one of the few things that reminded him of his mom.

He drove back home on autopilot, guided by muscle memory than anything else, because his thoughts were far away.

Far away, further than his car, his adult body, than this damned city.

Wilbur never understood people who drank whiskey.

He couldn't understand how someone could be so masochistic or desperate, to drink anything more than half a glass on their fifteenth birthday to impress their friend.

It tasted like vodka mixed with perfume, and if he wanted to drink perfume, there were much cheaper ways to do so.

While it was hard to say that he 'didn't like alcohol', whiskey had a special place in his heart. A place full of hate and resentment.

Until today.

Because when he puts Fundy to bed that night, pulling the covers up to his ears, all he wants is to simply - get fucking wasted.

It's been a while since he drank anything other than one beer in front of the TV, because he never had the need, nor the time to do so.

But now, his thoughts are still a bit dazed, he's tired and a fucking grown ass man, and he doesn't have to explain himself to anyone, on why he wants to get drunk once in a while (and especially not to himself).

The dusty bottle still sits where he left it on his last birthday, stuffed right up against the back of the cupboard. The label itself looks as if it was very unsuccessfully trying to pretend to be something three times more expensive, and when he manages to open it, he winces at the familiar smell of cheap alcohol.

He makes sure, once again, that Tommy is also asleep in his cradle, before pouring the whiskey into the glass.

He grimaces at the first sip, but drinks the rest as quickly as possible, trying not to focus on the burning, bitter aftertaste. And then he does it again.

He stops at the third glass, feeling the familiar warmth spread over his body. He closes his eyes.

His head is buzzing, but this time in this pleasant, numbing way, when he can just sit at the table

with a glass full of whiskey and think about nothing.

The thoughts about earrings, about new bills coming in a month, about the kid sleeping next to his bed. Just turn it all off for a while.

He tilts his head back, slowly sipping the rest of the alcohol. Yes, he definitely doesn't need to be thinking about any of these things right now.

About his mother, her warm smile that has become so rare over time, her cold eyes, their constant arguments, their harsh words, her funeral where no one cried, the flowers he left on her grave.

About the picture still hanging in the hallway, a woman with long, dark hair, most beautiful smile, her tired face as he held Fundy in his arms for the first time.

His hands tighten on the glass, feeling the world around him blur a bit. His fingers tap nervously against his thigh, and he takes a deep breath.

During the day, it's easy to do fill his mind with meaningless tasks and routine. At night, it's harder to ignore the weight in his heart.

With a trembling hand, he pours himself another drink.

Before he realizes it, he can feel tears running down his cheeks.

It's been a long time, since he was able to remember their faces so clearly, to hear all their arguments replay in his mind, his mistakes, that one, rainy evening.

All the contentment that came with the momentary dullness, disappears suddenly, and all he can do is rest his elbows on the table, burying his face in his hands, trying to calm his rapid heartbeat.

He already remembered why he wasn't drinking.

Suddenly, something pulls on his shirt, and he flinches, as he looks down.

Fundy stands by his chair, one hand on his shirt, the other holding close his plush fox. He looks sleepy, but clearly worried; eyes slightly wet.

"I had a bad dream," he whispers.

It takes Wilbur a moment to shake off that first shock, long enough for the words to reach him fully.

Half-full glass of whiskey stands in front of him on the counter.

He swallows hard.

"Oh."

Fundy frowns, tilting his head slightly.

"You're crying?" He asks, and Wilbur immediately wipes his face on his sleeve.

"No, no, it's just... Something in my eye. Come on, let's get you to bed."

He leads Fundy back to his room, putting one hand on the wall when he suddenly feels dizzy.

He pulls the covers over his son, stroking his hair and leaning in to kiss his forehead. Fundy

winces.

“You smell weird.”

Wilbur's fingers tighten on the sheets.

When he wakes up the next morning, cheek resting on the table and his neck numb, there is less alcohol in the bottle than he last remembered.

His head is still fuzzy, the blood pounding in his ears, and the rising sun shines from the window, harsh on his eyes. It takes him a long time to figure out, what actually woke him up.

Until he finally hears the quiet crying, finally breaking through his sleepy daze.

He sits up, a bit more present in reality, tho still mostly driven by reflexes. However, when he gets up from his seat, he immediately doubles over, covering his mouth with his hand.

He doesn't even have time to turn on the lights, before running into the bathroom and falling to his knees in front of the toilet.

The bitter aftertaste still lingers on the tip of his tongue, deep in his throat, as he rocks Tommy in his arms only moments later.

The events of last night slowly come back to him, and with them the feeling of guilt and, simply, shame.

He doubts Fundy will remember anything from yesterday. His eyes were sleepy and his voice drowsy, but the mere fact that Wilbur remembers, is enough.

As he hides the bottle back into the cupboard, he feels more ashamed of himself than even before.

He never wanted Fundy to see him like that.

He rests his forehead against the cupboard and cries. Because that's all he can really do.

Four weeks had gone by so quickly, that he hadn't even had a chance to realize how much all of this was slipping through his fingers, how much he was losing himself.

Wilbur wouldn't get drunk in front of a baby, wouldn't sell his mother's earrings, wouldn't take out his frustration on his son.

He remembers the words of his horrible, nosy neighbor. And when he said, he had everything under control, that they were going to be fine, maybe he always knew that was a lie.

And in this sudden desperation, he pulls the cardboard box from under his couch, that small area of everything he had left of his mother.

He quickly pulls out one of the old notebooks, covered with round coffee stains and childish scribbles. He looks through it, his eyes skimming the pages.

He's not sure what exactly he's looking for. But the answer is probably: *anything*.

Any familiar name, face, address, *whatever*-

He pauses suddenly, as his gaze shifts to a phone number, written down in his mother's handwriting. The name next to it seems to bring out some old memories. Scraps of conversations he overheard, some old photos stuffed deep into closets, drawers, out of sight.

Mindlessly, he pulls his phone out of his pocket, typing in it. And before he fully realizes what he's doing, he hears the familiar sound of dialing up the number.

After five seconds, his thumb automatically hovers over the red area on the screen, but suddenly the noise stops. On the other end, he only hears slight rustling, some movement before-

“Hello?”

Wilbur shudders slightly, as if surprised that someone actually picked up, before answering.

“Uhm. Phil?” he asks, and then hesitantly adds, “Minecraft?”

For a moment it's silent, before someone sighs heavily, on the other end.

“Yes. Yes, that's my real name,” *Phil* says again, clearly tired, if a bit irritated. “Who is this?”

Chapter End Notes

Wilbur is a good dad I promise, he's just having a mental breakdown

He gets better

... Eventually.

The Visitors

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hi!” He greets him as soon as he opens the door. “You must be Wilbur.”

In reality, Phil sounds much less miserable than he did on the phone, and that's not a compliment at all.

With a loose, green suit jacket, polished shoes, and a striped hat on his head, he looks like someone you'd meet in a very rich, very glamorous neighborhood in America, and also one of the performers in a circus at the same time.

His blond hair is cut unevenly and messy, his eyes are bright and shiny with some remnants of past youth.

There's a long scar on the left side of his jaw.

Wilbur shakes his hand, as he glances down. In his other hand, Phil holds a long, dark, wooden cane, ended with a shiny, golden handle, shaped like a crow.

Wilbur quickly looks away from it.

“Yes. And so you're my...” He stops.

The correct term sticks somewhere at the back of his throat. Because addressing a complete stranger in that way, tho not incorrect, and maybe even expected in this situation, feels weirdly awkward and... Inappropriate.

But the man just smiles, as he adjusts his hat with one hand.

“Phil. At your service.”

Although last night, when he was extremely desperate, emotional and somewhat still drunk, Phil seemed to be his last hope, now, when he stands in the middle of his hallway, Wilbur is slowly starting to regret every decision that has led him to this moment.

“It's so warm here,” Phil says, taking off his shoes. “But that's not really a surprise. It's always windy where I live.”

He says, like they are having a perfectly nice, pleasant conversation. As if that's what you're supposed to talk about with your nephew, who you're meeting for the first time in your life. *The fucking weather.*

Tho, really, he's not even sure what else they're supposed to be talking about.

Because how can you casually talk to someone, practically a stranger, who just last night called you crying, asking for any help, because suddenly he ended up with a newborn and a kid in one, small apartment, and his mother is *dead*.

“I'll be there tomorrow,” said Phil, who had never even spoken to him before in his entire life, in a voice a little calmer than before, as Wilbur wiped his eyes with his sleeve. “As soon as possible, okay? We'll figure something out, kid. You'll be fine.”

And now they stand in silence, and in his cramped, cluttered hallway, Phil seems so impossibly out of place.

Finally, Phil taps his cane lightly against the floor.

“Well. So, where are the kids?”

Wilbur opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, the door to the next room opens and Fundy walks out into the hallway, clutching his plush fox to his chest and rubbing his eyes.

Suddenly he freezes, one hand still pressed against his face, and his eyes widen rapidly. He makes a soft noise and quickly hides behind his father's legs, his fingers clenched in the fabric of his pants.

Phil smiles, crouching down, leaning on his cane.

Fundy just presses his face tighter against the curve of his knee.

“Hey, kid. What's your name?” He asks gently

“Fundy. Fundy, this is Phil,” Wilbur answers for him.

Because his son, still staring with wide eyes at the stranger from behind his legs, doesn't seem to have the strength or the will to do it himself.

“Fundy?” Phil looks at him, seeming a little too happy to hear that. “Terrible name. I love it.”

Wilbur blushes a little, as he puts his hand to the back of his son's head.

“That's Sally's... Uhm. His mother named him. It's a song, her favorite...”

“His mother?”

Phil's gaze shifts towards the wall, and as if he only now fully noticed the picture hanging there.

This one, loathsome picture that's still there, like it always was. The one that Wilbur hung by himself and willingly keeps there. Just to make sure he'll never accidentally forget, about that aching emptiness in his heart.

“But-”

“I live alone,” he adds immediately.

However, Phil seems to have another question on his mind, as he shifts his gaze from the photograph to Fundy again.

“He's ginger.”

Wilbur closes his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath.

“I know,” he finally says, a bit more irritated than a moment ago. “It's from his mother's side.”

Phil actually looks a little flustered for a moment, as he nervously adjusts his hat.

“Ah. Yes, of course.”

He clears his throat, smiling again.

“It's your son, right?” He looks up at Wilbur for a moment, before looking back at Fundy. “And how old are you again?”

“Five,” Wilbur says. “He doesn't talk. I mean, he does, but not to strangers. He's... Shy. Nothing personal.”

To his amazement, Phil just smiles, nodding along.

“Oh, I understand. It reminds me of someone, you know?”

He gets up, leaning on the cane, wincing a bit. Fundy, who seems to still be torn between wanting to hide from the world, and taking a closer look at this new stranger, keeps glancing at him from behind his father's legs.

“And Tommy?” Phil asks, and Wilbur nods at the entrance to the room on the left.

It takes him a moment to convince Fundy to let go of his pants, and eventually he just picks up him up, letting him hide his face in his shoulder. By that time, Phil is already leaning over the cradle.

“Oh.” He covers his face with his hand for a moment, smiling gently. “Look how tiny he is...”

He reaches, but pauses for a moment, looking at Wilbur questioningly.

Wilbur feels his jaw clench involuntarily, but ultimately, he just shrugs.

It's only when Phil picks up Tommy, that he realizes how similar they are. The same fair, almost golden hair, blue eyes, same nose.

They both look so much like *her*.

“Hi, Tommy.”

The baby stares at him with big eyes, but to Phil's visible surprise, he doesn't start crying. Maybe because of the sheer confusion at the sight of the stranger, or maybe he just hadn't fully shaken off the sleep, from which Phil's arrival woke him up a few minutes ago.

“He's so cute,” Phil says, gently swaying the baby in his arms.

“Uhm. And loud,” Wilbur murmurs.

Phil just smiles.

“That's good. It means his diaphragm is working.” He looks at Tommy again, changing the tone of his voice. “Right? You just have to let it all out sometimes, yeah?”

“Yeah. And in the middle of the night, specifically. That's very important.”

Phil laughs, and Wilbur feels himself smiling involuntarily, just a bit.

“Oh, yes. That's the best time, right? Reminds me of your mom.”

At those last words, the atmosphere shifts a bit.

Phil's face changes to something more serious, strange nostalgia and melancholy, as he looks into Tommy's eyes.

Fundy wraps his arms tighter around his neck, but Wilbur sets him down on the floor.

“Fundy, go to your room.”

The boy looks at him as if he wants to protest, but in the end he only purses his lips as he disappears down the hall.

“I saw you at the funeral,” Phil says, a little softer, as the door to the room closes. Wilbur frowns.

“I don't remember-”

“You bumped into me,” Phil says, forcing a little laugh.

Wilbur feels himself blush slightly.

“Oh, right. That's... I'm sorry.”

Phil looks back at the door to Fundy's room.

“He doesn't know?” He asks, and Wilbur shakes his head

“Not yet.”

“And... Are you planning to tell him?”

Wilbur opens his mouth, then closes it. His jaw clenches nervously.

Tommy reaches out one hand to Phil's ear, and the man kind of automatically tilts his head, letting him touch the green crystal hanging from his earring.

“I don't know,” he finally replies, honestly.

Phil's face is hard to read, but ultimately he just says:

“You should tell him. It's not good to keep those kinds of secrets from children.”

It's also not good to tell others how they should raise their children, he thinks, but doesn't say it aloud. Instead, he just shrugs.

“I will tell him. Once he gets used to... *This.*”

He waves his hand around the room, including Tommy, still fascinated with the earring.

Phil nods slowly, and Tommy makes a distinct sound of disapproval as the jewelry slips away from between his fingers.

“Fine. I can help you with that, Wilbur. All of it. That's why I'm here.”

Wilbur stares at him for a moment.

At his uncle, he saw for the first time in his life, who only heard his voice less than twenty-four hours ago, and who offered to help him.

And maybe, it's just the way he looks at him with understanding, how he holds Tommy gently in her arms, like he knows what he's doing. Because in the end, he says:

“I need to do some shopping.”

Convincing Fundy to get into Phil's car, soon turns out to be a much more difficult task than he anticipated.

Especially because after taking one good look at it, Wilbur himself loses all the desire to get any closer to it.

The car looks to be an expensive one, white, new model, reminding him of one of those that always stand as an advertisement in shopping malls.

Or rather: as if someone just took a car like that and decided to convert it into the worst-looking vehicle that has ever appeared on the streets.

Apart from the green seats, and far too much clutter behind the windshield, the rear is almost completely covered with stickers.

And so he's not at all surprised, when his son hides behind his legs again and shakes his head.

“Come on, honey. We're just going to the store, it'll be quick.”

Only after his third attempt at bribery, this time with lollipops, Fundy lets him put on his seatbelt in the backseat. Wilbur sits down next to the driver, with Tommy's carrier on his lap, and he's surprised to discover, that the inside of it smells kind of nice.

Not *'nice'* in the sense of *'pleasant'*, but rather in that strange way, all frequently used and beloved cars smell.

Phil closes the door behind him, and just taps on the steering wheel for a moment, as if waiting for something. It takes Wilbur a moment to realize, feeling his cheeks blush slightly.

“Uhm, yeah. Straight ahead for now.”

Phil gives him a smile, that was probably supposed to be reassuring, and starts the engine.

They sit in awkward silence for a while.

Wilbur looks out of the window, at the passing, gray streets and small, run down apartments, little patches of green, people rushing, not paying the slightest attention to the car with green seats.

Suddenly, Phil clears his throat and Wilbur glances at him.

“I can play some music.”

It's something between an offer and a weird question, so Wilbur just shrugs in response. Phil nods at the storage compartment on his side.

Wilbur leans in, keeps holding Tommy in place down with one hand, and opens it quickly, looking inside.

The first thing that catches his attention, are the photos, taped to one of the back panels, old and slightly blurred.

A boy, maybe six years old, grinning at the camera, proudly resting his hands on his new bike (judging by his scratched knees and dirty elbows).

A woman, facing away, the profile of her face obscured by dark hair, staring somewhere further at the sea horizon.

“Is this your wife?” He asks, pointing at the picture

Phil looks at him, then blushes suddenly, as he clutches his fingers on the wheel.

“No. It's not. I... Just. Choose anything.”

The tips of his ears and nose are red, but Wilbur doesn't ask any more questions, because Phil suddenly makes a sharp twist, clearly distracted. Instead, he pulls out a random CD from among the many that fill the glove compartment, handing it to the man.

The car fills with a melody, that Wilbur quickly recognizes as one of those old songs, that everyone knows but no one remembers learning all the words.

That feeling of familiarity calms him a bit, as he puts his head against the headrest, letting his tense muscles relax for a moment.

He glances through the mirror at the backseat, at Fundy, who keeps looking out the window, his legs swinging nervously.

“Don't move your legs, you'll get dirt on the seats,” Wilbur reminds him, but Phil dismisses him with a wave of his hand.

“This car has seen worse things,” he says, and pats the steering wheel affectionately.

After another long, awkward pause filled only with a familiar song, Phil takes a deep breath and says:

“So, what do you do for a living?”

It's a slightly better question than talking about the weather, but Wilbur winces a bit nonetheless.

“Nowadays? Making sure he doesn't get himself killed.” He nods at Fundy.

Maybe that sounds a bit better than admitting, that he hasn't had a stable job for over a year.

Phil just nods, never taking his eyes off the road.

After a few failed attempts to engage him in any kind of conversation, Phil gives up in the end, only tapping on the steering wheel in the beat of the song for the rest of the way.

Wilbur's relieved. Because although it's much better than yesterday, his head is still throbbing mercilessly and his eyelids close by themselves.

Tommy, visibly overwhelmed by the rhythm of the moving car, falls asleep in the carrier on his lap.

Fundy, on the other hand, seems feel the last thing that could be called '*sleepiness*'.

He's sitting upright, his eyes wide and alert and his shoulders raised high. Every now and then, he tries to sneak a peek at Phil, as if his fear of strangers is fighting his urge to look at him a little bit closer.

At his long earrings, numerous rings, the cane he casually tossed on the floor behind the driver's seat.

When they finally park in front of the store, Phil turns off the radio and the car is drowned in the awkward silence again.

Phil glances at him briefly, opens his mouth, like he wants to say something. But in the end, he only opens the door, getting out of the car.

The inside of the store is pleasantly cold, and Wilbur shudders involuntarily. Even though April has only just started, the weather outside has definitely taken a lot more summery approach over the last few days.

Phil watches Wilbur pull out the shopping cart, still holding Tommy's baby carrier in one hand, but then he rests his hand on the handle.

"I'll take it," he says, and Wilbur is still a bit too tired to protest for a long time.

Fundy holds his hand, still glancing at Phil with distrust.

Even though Phil's leaning against the cart, only now Wilbur notices that he's limping slightly on one leg.

For most of his life, Wilbur was never a fan of putting together any kind of shopping lists, believing that 'if something is really important, he will remember it'. And for most of his life, this principle was proven to be extremely flawed many times.

But Wilbur Soot is a very stubborn man, and he wasn't going to change that method, even now that he could feel Phil's eyes on him, as he returned to the same aisle for the third time, remembering he needs a third kind of pasta.

He knew what he was doing, and he was doing great. Both in terms of shopping, and in general.

Or so he kept telling himself, trying to ignore the fact that Phil's mere presence already proved otherwise.

After throwing everything into the cart, including the promised sweets for Fundy, which Wilbur had to take out of his hand, to keep him from eating it right there, in the middle of the store, they walk up to the checkout.

And Wilbur leans against the plastic behind the moving tape, feeling like the last bits of his energy are slowly draining from him.

Phil looks at him, obvious worry on his face, as they lay out the groceries from the cart. And when the cashier finishes scanning them, he puts his hand on Wilbur's, as he reaches for his wallet.

"I got it."

And maybe, he should be arguing.

To keep the last remains of dignity he has left, to continue denying that just yesterday, he called a complete stranger in the last, final act of desperation.

But it's Sunday, way too early for his hang-over mind, his head still aches, and the inside of his wallet doesn't look any fuller than it did last evening.

He lets Phil pay, his cheeks burning.

Phil drops them off outside the house, offering to help carry the groceries, and Wilbur almost immediately dismisses him, as he glances at the cane in the backseat.

But Phil insists on at least walking him to the door, which makes it a bit harder for him to refuse, looking at how much money he has just spent on him.

So in the end, he just shrugs, as he unbuckles the Fundy's seatbelt.

Fundy runs up the stairs in front of them, jumping over two at a time.

“You're gonna fall over!” Wilbur warns him, and Phil laughs softly behind him.

“Kids are like that, always moving and running around. I remember...” He suddenly stops when they hear someone yell above them.

“God! Watch your steps, or you'll- Oh, Mr. Soot.”

His neighbor is standing in the stairwell, one hand resting on Fundy's shoulder. She suddenly frowns, as he looks from Wilbur to Phil.

“Oh. I see you have guests.”

In the way she straightens up a bit, tightens her fingers on her purse, squints her eyes, Wilbur can accurately sense, how excited she is to learn just a bit more about his personal life than she needs to know. Even though, the tone of her voice can be misleading.

To her surprise, and in part Wilbur's too, Phil smiles brightly as he offers his hand.

“Phil Minecraft. And yes, that's my real name.”

The woman hesitates for a moment, before shaking his hand.

“And why wouldn't it be real?” She laughs a bit awkwardly.

Phil's face suddenly turns serious, his smile disappearing.

“It's different on a few passports.”

They stand in silence for a moment.

“O-oh. Well, I have to go now. Goodbye,” she quickly says, and with a flushed face, passes them on the stairs.

Wilbur looks at Phil, eyebrow raised.

“What was that supposed to be?”

Phil shrugs.

“I like to scare people.” Here he looks down at Fundy, who's staring at him with wide eyes. “Don't do that, tho. I'm old, so I can.”

The boy nods, his eyes still on him, and Wilbur feels himself smiling slightly.

But when he says goodbye to them on the doorstep, Phil's smile fades, and something between sadness and melancholy appears on his face. But before Wilbur is able to think anything of it, he says:

“Mr Soot '. I didn't know she changed her name...”

His voice is calm, but distant, and filled with such sorrow, that now Wilbur fully realizes, that on the same day, twelve minutes after midnight when he lost his mother - Phil lost his sister.

“She was never married, if that's what you're worried about.”

Phil doesn't answer.

Two weeks later, Wilbur learns that Phil lives a full three hours away from his city. Which immediately makes him feel slightly more guilty, for several reasons.

Mainly because, the amount of money he must be spending on gas every day, makes him feel a bit weak.

But also because, even knowing this, he doesn't want his visits to change in any way.

Over the past two weeks, Phil has been visiting him almost every day.

And although, Wilbur spent the first few carefully watching his every move with a frown, as he picked Tommy up in his arms or leaned over the Fundy, and the next few days, sleeping for all those lost, restless nights, he ultimately has to admit, that Phil managed to sneak his way onto his good side.

He still tensed up, when Phil seemed to instinctively grab Fundy's hand as they crossed the road, or when he saw a bit of hesitation on his face as he handed him Tommy back, but they're coming from his own, deeply ingrained protectiveness more than anything else.

Because the truth is, that it was easy to trust Phil.

With his bizarre clothes, a face that sometimes seemed so much younger when he smiled, his calm voice and, more generally, an incredibly warm presence, Phil, though still so similar to her, was anything but his sister.

Wilbur still remembers her cold gaze and unwavering face, which over the years only grew harder to ignore.

And maybe it's a bit selfish.

Perhaps, if he searched deep enough, he would find some traces of his own, desperate grasping for any sense of stability, and that feeling of security.

Maybe he should feel bad about the fact, that he still can't see Phil as a family, but a man he trusted only enough to believe he wouldn't murder him in his sleep.

Or maybe he still had a right to feel like a stranger in this situation, that he was suddenly thrown into; maybe he still had a right to mourn.

He's not entirely sure.

But Wilbur is just very tired, and is very eager to find support in whatever it is that Phil offers him.

Fundy, however, though less scared than when they first met, still seems to hang somewhere between admiration and dread (although the latter seems to disappear instantly, when Phil starts bringing him sweets).

Even when he broke that first barrier, it's still hard to say that he's 'talkative' around Phil. He's still mostly silent, except for a short 'yes' or 'no' (which is still quite a success in Wilbur's eyes), and always stands closer to Wilbur, grabbing the sleeve of his shirt.

And maybe that's why, as he sits next to Phil on the folded couch, watching the man sip coffee from his mug, his fingers nervously tighten on his pants for a moment.

Phil sets down his drink, looking at him expectantly. He opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, Wilbur finally manages:

“I have a job interview tomorrow.”

Phil raises his eyebrows slightly, then smiles, maybe a bit unsure.

“Oh? Well, that's great.”

Wilbur continues to fiddle with the end of his shirt between his fingers.

“Yes. I know. But...”

He takes a shaky breath. Phil smiles encouragingly, but his heart still beats a little too fast.

“Can you watch the kids then?” He says, his voice quiet.

Phil freezes for a moment. And then his face softens and he laughs.

“This is why we 'needed to talk'? You really scared me there, I thought someone died again, or something.” Wilbur winces slightly. “Sure, I can look after them. What time?”

Though he takes Phil's words with relief at that moment, the next afternoon, as he says goodbye to Fundy at the door, he slowly begins to feel a strange sense of uncertainty.

“If anything happens, I'll call you,” Phil assures him, as Wilbur waves goodbye to Tommy in the cradle.

Logically, there is absolutely no reason for him to worry.

Sure, Phil has never been alone with them before, but he has already shown that he has no inherently bad intentions, and maybe can be trusted, if only for these two hours.

However, the farther he moves away from his apartment, the more he feels this irrational stress, creep up on him.

His hands are shaking on the steering wheel.

When he sits down on a chair in front of someone's office, his shirt sticks to his back and his feet shift nervously. He's constantly checking his phone.

During the interview, his voice trembles, he gets lost in his own words, mixing up dates, names; he glances, every now and then, at the clock hanging on the wall.

He left home just over an hour ago, and the weird, tight feeling in his throat had only grown, making it hard to breathe, to think.

He leaves the office, mumbling a quiet 'goodbye' under his breath, his palms sweating mercilessly.

He gets in his car, pulls out his phone, hovers over Phil's number.

He tosses his phone on the other seat, hides his face in his hands.

Just sits there for a moment, trying to catch his breath.

He has no idea why, he's so nervous. Why his hands are shaking, his eyes unfocused.

There's no need to panic, Phil definitely has everything under control, and it hasn't even been that long, and he's fine, he should be fine-

And yet.

He's so fucking tired.

When he starts the engine, it takes him a few moments to realize, that his hands are not leading him to his part of the city at all, but towards the exit from it, familiar, forest roads.

He doesn't change it, driving as if on autopilot, thinking about absolutely nothing and everything all at once.

And only after a few so minutes, when his eyes rest on the signpost, suddenly everything hits him in an instant.

Because he knows this signpost, he knows this road, he knows the name of the lake it leads to.

Sally.

And he hates himself so much, that in this one moment of weakness, his mind lead him blindly to this place, lead him to her.

And suddenly he sees her face again, her smile, dark hair that curled around his shoulders as she leaned over to kiss him. Her eyes, laughter, distant gaze, cool touch, messages on her phone-

He pulls quickly to the side of the road, stopping abruptly and taking his hands off the steering wheel.

He doesn't come home until an hour later, and Fundy immediately hugs his legs tightly, as he steps in.

“Dad! Phil helped me finish that puzzle you didn't know! And he gave me dessert before dinner, but I'm not supposed to tell you!”

Wilbur's silent. He kneels down on the floor, hugging his son tightly, hiding his face in his red hair.

“... Dad?”

His voice is hesitant as Wilbur's shoulders starts to shake suddenly, with a soft sob.

He hears Phil's voice, like through a fog, he feels Fundy being pulled away from him, a warm hand on his shoulder.

Fundy shakes his head violently, clinging tighter to his father's side, but Wilbur steps back himself.

“Sorry. I'm okay,” he says.

His voice is weirdly stable after all.

He can hear faint arguing, Fundy shaking his head, before reluctantly disappearing into his room.

“Come on, kid. Take it easy.”

Phil helps him get up.

He doesn't get the job.

He will know for sure three days later, when, as usual, 'we'll call you' turns out to be a polite lie. But he knows it even now, sitting on the couch, holding a cup of tea in his trembling hands.

The sight of his son and Tommy, who's still sleeping safely in his cradle, seemed to calm him down a bit. So for a long moment, he was just leaning over it, softly pushing back his fair hair.

But eventually, Phil sat him down on the couch, throwing a blanket over his shoulders, finally forcing him to take off his uncomfortable shoes.

With each passing minute, the panic and anxiety slowly fade away, leaving behind shame. His hands tighten on the cup.

But Phil doesn't really look at him in any judgmental way, more with obvious concern.

“What happened?” he finally asks.

His voice is calm, but Wilbur flinches anyway.

He shrugs.

“You don't wanna say, or you don't know?”

Another shrug.

Phil sighs, and Wilbur feels a slight sting of guilt. But he's not entirely sure why.

“Does this happen often?”

Wilbur looks at him, frowning.

“You know, those kinds of...” He makes an unidentified movement with his hand. “*Breakdowns.*”

He adds that last part uncertainly, as if already regretting his choice of words.

At first, Wilbur opens his mouth to deny it. But after a second thought, he just shrugs again.

“Sometimes,” he replies bluntly. “But it's nothing!” He adds quickly, seeing the worry on Phil's face. “It's just, I get a little... Emotional. When I'm stressed. You know, with a job interview and all...”

Phil doesn't look convinced.

But seems to understand, that pushing further will only result in more dismissing, and decides against it.

“You know,” he says instead. “My son was the same, when he was younger.”

This statement surprised Wilbur a bit.

Maybe he should have figured it out, by how confident in his ability Phil seems to be around the kids.

He still remembers those photos, with a boy on the bicycle and the woman on the beach, in Phil's car, but the man himself never openly mentioned his family before.

Perhaps he simply assumed, after Phil's reaction when he asked about the photograph, that it's a touchy subject.

“You have a son?” He asks.

“One.” A slightly nostalgic smile appears on Phil's face. “My little sunshine.”

“Oh,” Wilbur blurts out, a bit stupidly.

“Actually,” Phil turns, looking out the window. “You should meet him. I think you'll like him.”

Chapter End Notes

Philza pog

Also!!! Keep in mind that Wilbur is an unreliable narrator, and sometimes says or thinks things that are just stupid or just straight up incorrect.

He doesn't know the proper words for what he's experiencing, or how to deal with it.

Take A Chance On Me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil's *'little sunshine'*, turns out to be a tall, bulky man, tilting his head to not hit the door frame.

Amidst long, faded pink hair, many earrings, sharp features, and a long, faded scar across the bridge of his nose, Wilbur finds no real resemblance to Phil.

And in all his ridiculousness, he seems much less friendly.

“You're Wilbur?”

Wilbur nods, slowly, and when the man squeezes his hand tightly, he struggles to stop himself from grimacing.

“Techno.”

Wilbur looks at him, his old leather, washed out T-shirt. Next to Phil, he looks a bit less like someone you might meet by accident at a concert, and more like someone, who will be waiting for you in your car when you get in, with a suspiciously large amount of money in a black bag.

“Your...” he starts, but Techno interrupts him.

“My name? Yeah, I know. But don't look at father, it's not his fault.”

“Your shoes are wet,” he mumbles.

Techno looks down at his boots, leaving muddy stains on the tiles.

“Oh.”

Phil, who looks even shorter than usual next to Techno, pats his son on the shoulder, laughing softly.

“Maybe you could make us some tea?”

“You don't want coffee?” Wilbur asks, watching Techno pull off his heavy boots, placing them next to Fundy's tiny sneakers.

“Oh, no. If my heart beats even faster, I think I might just drop dead right here. Techno drives like a madman.” Here he looks at his son, with clear disapproval. “He'll kill us someday.”

“It's not my fault *they* don't know how to drive...” Techno mumbles under his breath.

A few minutes later, when Wilbur places two steaming mugs in front of them, the door to the other room opens slowly and Fundy's sleepy face leans out into the hallway.

“Hey,” Wilbur smiles encouragingly as he watches the boy shift his gaze to the extra pairs of shoes. “We have guests. Come on, you can say hello.”

Fundy, understandably, does *not* want to say hello to anyone, because his eyes widen, and the door to his room slams shut again, almost immediately.

Wilbur looks at Techno apologetically.

“He's shy,” he explains.

Techno doesn't seem surprised at all, just nodding his head with strange understanding.

But when Wilbur sits down at the table, there's a sudden, awkward silence.

If Phil made him feel safe from the start, Techno seems to have almost the opposite effect. So overwhelming with all his posture, revoking this feeling of stress and insecurity.

He's a bit *wary* of him.

And maybe that's just silly.

Maybe he acts a bit like an old grandma, who's afraid that anyone who owns a motorcycle is trying to demoralize her grandchildren and the whole youth, and only spends their days drinking and doing drugs.

And maybe he shouldn't have assumed anything, not this quickly, even if Techno's at least a foot taller, his arms are three times wider, even though his face looks all brooding as he glances over his room, even if the scar on his face is-

Phil, seeming completely oblivious to the tense atmosphere, takes a sip of his tea, then looks at Wilbur with an easy smile.

Wilbur bites his lip, as he feels two pairs of eyes on him, and finally chokes out:

“Uhm. How was the trip?”

It's an extremely stupid question, and he immediately wants to hit himself over the head for it, preferably with something hard.

Preferably something very hard, that will knock him unconscious, and he won't have to be involved in this awkward conversation anymore.

Phil winces slightly.

“Awful. I hate how he drives.”

He looks at his son, but his words, though with a hint of real reprimand, carry no real venom. And Techno doesn't seem to care about them much, just rolling his eyes.

“I told you already, it's not my fault.” His voice is deep, but calm, although you can hear a hint of annoyance in it. “There are tourists everywhere. And it's not even summer yet! They come from fuck knows where, and think that everything is allowed.” He puts his hand on the table, sighing. “Fucking hate city people.”

“O-oh.” Wilbur glances awkwardly to the side. “That's, uhm. That happens.”

“Yeah. I know it does.”

He takes a sip from out of his mug, clearly ending his short monologue, which Wilbur is extremely grateful for.

But before anyone can break the awkward silence, there's a soft rustling coming from the far end of

the room, followed by a, much louder, sob.

Wilbur immediately stands up, for perhaps the first time in his life, welcoming Tommy's crying with relief.

He quickly leans over the cradle, picking up the baby in his arms.

“Hey, hey. Come on now...”

He lets him rest on his shoulder, rocking him in his arms.

Unlike Techno, who shifts a bit awkwardly in his chair, Phil smiles as he walks over to Wilbur and peers over his shoulder. Seeing him, Tommy calms down almost immediately, staring at him with the big, bright eyes.

“Hi, Tommy.”

Phil laughs when Wilbur hands him Tommy, noting that the stress of just thinking about handing the baby over to someone else less than a month ago, now seems to have almost completely disappeared.

And it certainly has a lot to do with the fact that the boy himself is laughing, smiling and holding out his small hands towards Phil.

“Talkative today, aren't we?” He looks towards Techno, still seated at the table. “Come say hi to your cousin.”

Techno seems like he would rather do anything else, actually, but in the end, he awkwardly walks over to Phil, looking over at the kid.

“Uhm. Hello?”

He raises a hand, and Wilbur feels himself tense involuntarily. But Techno keeps it still, as if unsure how to move.

Now, looking at the three of them, Wilbur fully realizes just how much Techno doesn't seem to resemble his father in any way.

Not just with the color of his hair (his eyebrows are dark and boxy, as he frowns) or his eyes, but also his entire posture, face structure.

And maybe, a bit, with all the selfishness of it, Wilbur is grateful for that.

Because still, looking at Phil's and Tommy's familiar, cold, blue eyes, sometimes made the fresh gash in his heart sting a little bit more.

“You want to hold him?” Phil asks, and Techno's eyes widen, pulling away almost immediately.

“No! I mean, I—” He glances at Wilbur, giving him an unsure smile. “I'm not good with kids.”

Tommy, on the other hand, doesn't seem to be concerned about this statement, hesitantly reaching out his hand in his direction.

“Aw, he likes you!” Phil laughs, cradling Tommy in his arms.

It's hard to say the same about Fundy, who a few minutes later, already dressed but with his hair

still in a complete mess, re-emerges from his bedroom, holding a plush fox under his arm.

Wilbur smiles at him encouragingly.

“And this is my son,” he says to Techno, moving his hand toward the kid. “Fundy, this is Techno.”

Fundy, his freckled face flushed, staring at the stranger with big eyes, runs to the table, quickly jumping onto Wilbur's lap. He pulls his arm down and, definitely not as discreetly as he thinks, and definitely too loudly, whispers in his ear:

“He has pink hair.”

Wilbur feels himself smiling. Techno looks at them with a raised eyebrow, but on his usually sharp face, a gentle outline of amusement suddenly appears.

“Yeah, he definitely does,” Wilbur answers, in the same loud-whisper.

“I didn't know they can do that.”

“They can't,” Techno says, clearly trying to sound exceptionally gentle. “I mean, uhm. It's impossible to be born with that. But you can dye them. Like, clothes or something. You can do that too. When you're older.”

Fundy, seeming equally as thrilled and terrified that he actually got an answer, only stares at him silently, clenching his hands around his father's arm.

As Phil and Techno prepare to leave, Fundy squeezes his hand tightly, still half-hiding behind his legs.

However, his eyes are clearly fixed on one point, above the rolled-up sleeve of the Techno's jacket.

And as Phil adjusts his hat on his head, turning to face them, Fundy stands on tiptoe, pointing his finger at it.

“What is that?” He asks softly, and Wilbur immediately places his hand on his, pulling it down.

“Don't point with your finger,” he reminds him, but he follows his gaze, only now noticing a dark spot on the skin.

Techno looks down too, as if he just now remembered it.

“Oh, yeah.” With one movement, he moves his jacket higher. “It's a tattoo.”

He leans in, turning his inner arm towards Fundy. And in fact, it is a tattoo.

Clearly old, slightly stretched with the skin, but still distinct, right next to a faded scar.

Fundy opens his mouth, staring at him in an astonishment as sincere, as only children can have. And Wilbur can't help that strange feeling, that always comes to him when he sees his son so fascinated by something.

“It's a pig,” he whispers.

Phil laughs, while Techno looks a bit offended.

“It's actually a boar-”

“No, it's a pig,” Fundy corrects him, with certainty and stubbornness that almost every five-year-old possess.

For a moment, Techno looks like he is pondering whether this statement is meant to be some kind of weird insult, while Phil turns his back to them, covering his mouth with his hand, and clearly trying not to laugh.

“Uhm. Because I like pigs.”

And for that one moment, Techno's face softens as he looks down at Fundy, who's so much smaller.

I'm not good with kids', Techno said.

And maybe it was partially true, seeing how he still refuses to pick up Tommy, how he clearly gets tense even when he's just close to him, as if scared that one sudden movement could hurt him (which is, in all honesty, a very understandable fear).

But no matter how true that is, Fundy doesn't seem to care at all.

From that first meeting, Fundy seemed to just fall in love with Techno almost immediately.

And it took him so long to get used to Phil's presence, to feel comfortable around him. But with Techno, he got attached like a very persistent, very cute, if a bit annoying puppy.

Wilbur's not entirely sure why it was Techno, that seemed to impress his son so much.

Because where Fundy was apparently seeing a new favorite family member (although really - he didn't have that much competition), Wilbur still felt just very unsure, and in all honesty, a bit wary.

While Techno clearly has a more gentle side, looking at how he talks to Phil or Fundy, he remains cold with Wilbur, distant, as if unsure how to act.

And with Phil, with familiar features and eyes, it's hard to believe that Techno and Wilbur share at least a fraction of the same genes.

It's hard to get rid of that tense, awkward atmosphere between them. It's hard to think that maybe he judged him a bit too hastily, that maybe he was acting a bit childish, that maybe-

“Fundy,” Wilbur scolds his son, watching as he climbs a small stone wall by the sidewalk. “You're gonna fall.”

“I won't!” he yells back, and as if demonstrate it, he stands on one leg, almost losing his balance as a result.

“Fundy!”

Wilbur takes his hands off the stroller for a moment, grabbing his son under his arms and putting

him on the ground. Fundy only puffs his cheeks, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I wouldn't fall! Right, Techno?”

In a few steps, he reaches the man's side, cocking his head to look up at him, with a very convincingly faked, innocent smile.

“What? I mean, uhm...” Techno looks at Wilbur, who's already staring at him with sharp eyes, raised eyebrow. “Listen to your father.”

Fundy seems even more offended and hurt by this statement, because he huffs, as he kicks a stone from under his feet.

Phil laughs softly.

“Good advice.” Suddenly his face changes slightly, frowning as he grips his fingers tighter on his cane. “Can we sit down for a moment?”

Techno immediately turns to face him, but Phil just waves his hand.

“It's nothing. Just got a little tired.”

Techno seems extremely unconvinced, still keeping an eye on his father as he sits down next to him, on a graffiti-covered bench.

Wilbur finds himself surprised once again, by the way Techno acts around Phil. Because despite their frequent teasing and bickering, there's so much respect and care in it, that Wilbur feels he never really experienced in his life.

And he probably never will.

He thinks about his mother, her cold face for a moment as he leans over the stroller and pushes away blond hair from Tommy's face.

Fundy, of course, loses interest in simply sitting very quickly, standing up and running around the bench three times, as if racing his own shadow.

Phil follows him with his gaze, and suddenly something appears on his face, instead of his normal, easy smile, as he frowns, as if worried.

“He could use some new shoes.”

Wilbur pauses for a moment, before straightening up, pretending his heart hasn't moved a little harder for a second.

“They're still good,” he says, feeling how obvious and pathetic the lie is.

Because every bleach and glue has a limit, to what they can do for those old sneakers.

His tiny sneakers, with ladybugs on them.

Phil looks at him, as if unsure is Wilbur's trying to convince him or himself.

“You know what, we can...” He starts and doesn't have to end, for the atmosphere to visibly thicken, as always when he proposed something similar.

All his life, if there was one thing Wilbur could be proud of himself for, it was being independent.

From the moment he left his mother's house, when he and Sally rented their cramped, old apartment, when he became a father.

When he sent Fundy to kindergarten, in between job interviews, rejected applications, offices.

When he was barely making it through the month, when he was sewing up his old clothes.

When he was selling his mother's earrings.

And maybe, really, he did build all of this, his whole world, on his own.

He built his own world, on a mountain made of sand that collapsed under the weight of one, little boy.

Maybe there was nothing wrong with asking for help. But there was definitely shame in accepting it.

“But I like them!” Fundy announces, immediately doing a pirouette, that would have probably ended badly if, Techno hadn't grabbed his arm in time.

But now, looking at his son, at his worn shoes, thinking of his definitely too thin winter jacket, old backpack, he realizes that maybe, this isn't about him.

Maybe he should finally admit it, instead of hiding behind excuses, promising himself it's the last time.

And that were to give Fundy that one moment of joy, or extra security, then maybe it was worth it.

Worth his shame, lost pride, guilt.

“I know. We'll talk later,” he says finally, his eyes still not looking at Phil.

Tommy reaches out to him, and Wilbur holds his tiny hand.

Fundy gets new shoes a few days later.

Blue, good quality, and looking more expensive than Wilbur thought it was possible. For a moment, the boy just stares at him in silent delight, watching them on his feet.

And Wilbur stares for a moment at the box, on which someone has deliberately crossed out the price tag with a dark marker.

That night, he turns from side to side for a long time, and there are so many thoughts in his head, that they all pass him randomly, not allowing him to focus on any of them.

And when Tommy finally wakes up crying, Wilbur picks him up from his cradle, with already practiced movements.

And he stares for a moment, at that little boy who destroyed his rickety sand castle, who's so similar to his mother, who touches his face with tiny hands, who's his brother.

When Fundy walks into the room a few minutes later, rubbing his wet, sleepy eyes with his hand, Wilbur only shifts to the couch without saying a word, making room for him.

That night, he falls asleep, holding Tommy close to him with one hand and stroking his son's red hair with the other. And finally, one thought sticks, lingers in his mind.

That he would do anything for them.

March turns into April, April into May, and Wilbur suddenly realizes it's already June.

Usually, that would mean nothing more than an increased frequency and intensity of kids screaming from the yard under his window (that lasts all summer long), that he suddenly starts to sweat about three times more, and the need to invest in new fans, because his apartment is slowly turning into a heated oven.

But now, June marks three months since his phone rang that one night, three months since he first picked up Tommy, and two months since he met Phil.

And sometimes, he still thinks back to his mother's apartment, to the chaos and mess that it was, and wonders if that would also be someone's first thought, when looking at his home.

That suddenly his life took a whole new, foreign direction, and he wasn't quite sure how to navigate it.

But still, the cradle next to his bed looks almost natural now, like it's supposed to belong there, and so does Tommy himself in his arms.

Phil's presence also feels natural.

It certainly has something to do with the fact how desperate he was when he first met him. How much Phil reminded him of his mother, while being the complete opposite of her, and with their shared mourning.

And maybe it's a bit funny, how quickly he became attached, how easily he accepted Phil in his life, even faster than Fundy did. But maybe, it didn't matter at all.

But despite all this, there were still clear boundaries between them. Things they didn't talk about, awkward moments, the tension between him and Techno.

And it was so easy for him to accept Tommy as more than just 'the boy with the same last name', but with Phil the right words still couldn't pass through his throat.

It's easy to call Phil a friend.

It's harder to call him family.

So when Phil greets him as usual, that one June afternoon, it takes Wilbur a moment to realize that something is wrong.

Phil looks nervously around the apartment, pondering, getting lost in his thoughts.

“Oh, that's nothing,” he finally says, as she helps him cut up vegetables for dinner. “Just...”

He pauses for a moment, the knife hanging over the carrot, fingers nervously tapping on the handle.

“Just...?” Wilbur encourages him.

The sight of Phil, so clearly stressed, seems to throw him off so much, he feels his throat tightening slightly as well.

A few thoughts run through his mind, though he tries his best to ignore them, focusing on not slicing his finger on the lettuce.

Phil takes a deep breath; looks at him. And suddenly a familiar smile flashes across his face, as if the mere sight of Wilbur has assured him of something.

“I was talking to Techno the other day,” he says, and Wilbur nods, going back to making dinner. “And well, we thought that... You know, it's practically summer.”

Wilbur nods as he starts cutting the still warm cauliflower.

“And kindergartens will probably start closing soon... Do you have any plans for the summer?”

“No, not really.”

“Ah. Well, that's great because... You know, this place could really use a little renovation...”

He takes his eyes off Wilbur for a moment, looking at the long crack in one of the walls.

Wilbur winces slightly.

“Yeah.”

“And we thought, that maybe...”

Uncertainty returns to his face. He stops several times, as if trying to choose the right words, turning the handle of the knife in his hand, but finally takes a deep breath, looks back at Wilbur-

“That maybe you can stay with us for the summer.”

His hand moves suddenly, the blade runs over his skin, a few drops of blood drip onto the cutting board.

“*Fuck!*”

He clenches the other hand around his finger, turns to Phil, staring at him with eyes wide open.

“Christ, Wilbur!”

Phil tears a piece off the paper towel next to him, grabs his wrist, pulls him closer, wipes the blood away.

His hands are rough and scarred, but warm and gentle.

“I'm sorry?” His voice is hesitant, and he continues to just stare at Phil in disbelief.

“You know, it's not a problem for us! We can hire someone, fix this place up, and you will be with us for that time.”

“... Oh.”

Wilbur swallows.

It's hard to say no to Phil. It's hard to say no, when he looks at him with visible excitement, smiling encouragingly. When it looks like he's got a whole brilliant plan in his head, all Wilbur has to do is trust him blindly.

Wilbur pulls his hand away.

“I ... That's so nice of you... But with everything, that would be so expensive...”

“It's nothing, really,” Phil assures him, but his smile slowly drops.

“Just...”

I would feel like I'm using you, I already feel that I'm using you, I will never be able to repay you-

“... No. I couldn't.”

“... Oh.”

And then disappointment appears on Phil's face, so deep like Wilbur has never seen in him before.

He looks down with strange melancholy and sadness. And in that one moment, he suddenly seems much older than usually. As if only now, Wilbur had fully noticed the deep lines near his eyes, a few gray hairs, and his rough hands.

“I just thought... You know, babies probably shouldn't be in all these paint fumes. And the noise...” They both, as if instinctively, look at Tommy sleeping in his cradle. “You know, I'm sure Fundy would love the beach. He's so pale, could use a bit of sun. And...”

He stops, pressing his lips together for a moment.

And that look alone is enough to make Wilbur feel a sting of guilt. He feels his cheeks burn, but before he can say anything, Phil adds quietly:

“And I could use some company.”

Wilbur curses himself a few hours later, as he waves goodbye to Phil, and stepping away so Fundy, breathless and dirty, with a ball under his arm, can get inside.

He curses himself, Phil, that bloody sad look on his face, how easily he got pulled again, closer, further, beyond their unspoken borders.

He leans against the frame of the bathroom door, watching his son wash the dirt off his face.

“Fundy,” he says, as the boy turns to him, grinning. “How would you feel about a little summer trip?”

yes Techno unironically calls Phil "father", because that's funny I think

Writing this fic so far taught me 2 things:

- I really don't like how my writing sounds in English
- There are more abba songs then I thought

Another Town Another Train

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Three days later, packing two stuffed bags, in an almost thirty degrees weather, into a sticker-covered trunk, Wilbur just mostly curses himself.

Partly, because for some reason he decided to pack half of his wardrobe, but mostly for agreeing to this at all.

Fundy definitely doesn't share his attitude though, because after he was able to finally get him out of bed at six in the morning, he seemed to be bursting with energy, jumping up and down beside the car.

“Hurry up!” He urges him, and Wilbur only gives him a tiered look.

When he turns his head, he catches his reflection in the glass window. He's red and sweaty, his hair stuck to his forehead, and he can still see dark spots under his eyes.

He looks, for lack of a better word, like shit and greatly regrets all his life decisions.

Beside him, Phil, who looks way too happy and too smug, laughs, holding Tommy up in his arms.

“Someone's excited, hum?”

Fundy nods eagerly.

“I want to see a seal! Because they live in the sea. Do you have seals there?”

Phil seemed to be thinking for a moment, looking at the boy.

“A bit. But I wouldn't advise getting close to them.”

Fundy's smile fades from his face; he tilts his head.

“Why?”

Phil smiles playfully.

“And where do you think Techno got that scar from?”

Five minutes later, Fundy finally manages to sit in one place long enough for Wilbur to fasten his seat belt, and Phil finally manages to secure Tommy in his seat.

“When he starts crying, you'e the one reaching him there,” Wilbur mutters under his breath, taking the seat next to the driver.

“He won't.” Phil waves his hand, turning the key; for a moment he turns to look back. “Right, kid? You'll be a big boy and won't cry, right?”

He looks at Wilbur again, and his face suddenly turns serious.

“There are a lot of cops on this road and I don't have a driving license. Let's not get pulled over, okay?”

“You don't have it on you, or in general?”

Phil doesn't answer.

Wilbur rests his head against the glass, laughing softly.

“You know what? I wouldn't even be surprised if you didn't. Nothing about you will surprise me anymore.”

Phil smiles to himself as he finally moves the car. When he glances at Wilbur for a moment, his eyes look oddly soft and gentle.

“You don't know a lot about me yet, Wilbur.”

As they leave the neighborhood, Wilbur stares out the window at their old, dirty block of flats until he's out of sight completely.

In the backseat, Fundy doesn't look back even once.

Wilbur, much like Tommy, sleeps through half of the car ride, with his head against the window, calmed by soft sounds from Phil's radio.

When he finally opens his eyes again, his phone tells him it is twenty minutes past noon and the view outside has changed completely.

They pass by several forests, fields where Fundy is the first one to shout '*cows!*', as well as those less suited for this landscape: gas stations and roadside restaurants.

Wilbur glances at Phil, who taps in the rhythm of the songs on the wheel.

Fundy in the back seat shifts in place until, finally, does the honors of saying the first, mandatory:

“Are we there yet?”

Wilbur closes his eyes, taking a deep breath.

“Not yet,” Phil replies.

The answer is the same when he asks for the second, third and fifth time. Fortunately, Wilbur is able to successfully avoid the next ones, because when he rests his head against the window again, and his eyelids close by themselves.

Wilbur's first thought, as Phil pulls up in the driveway, is that he has just found himself in a very unfunny episode of some dumb hidden-camera show.

Phil's house stands close to several others, modern, two-story ones, some of which are clearly only inhabited for one part of the year, judging by the state of the front the lawns.

That doesn't really change anything, because the house itself would look just as bizarre anywhere, except maybe for some very cheap amusement park.

The house looks as if it emerged, not only from a completely different decade, but even a century.

Dark brick walls, covered almost entirely with ivy, oblong windows, a pointed rooftop, ending with a decorated frieze.

The balustrade of the balcony, visible just above the porch is made out of stone, slightly covered with moss, and the entrance itself, looks like some kind of modest portal, sharply contrasting with the obnoxiously green door frame.

The garden is surrounded by a stone wall, with a heavy gate waiting open for them. The lawn, although covered with wild flowers, appears to be reasonably well-kept, with several enormous at the back of it, branches almost reaching the windows.

Wilbur is just silent for a moment, looking at Phil, then at the house again.

Fundy is also sitting, with his nose almost stuck to the window.

But his own feelings seem to be extremely different from Wilbur's, because at the same moment as his father mumbles: „You're fucking kidding me.” softly under his breath, the boy smiles wide.

“Cool!” He leans down, trying to unfasten his seat belt. “Like from a movie!”

It is, maybe a little bit, like from a movie.

One where a lot of people die, and he's definitely not the final girl, Wilbur thinks, running a hand over his face.

In the end, he only sighs, as he gets out of the car.

When he steps outside, he notices a bit more details.

Two chairs on the porch, with blankets thrown over them, a few abandoned magazines lying around them, heavy boots by the door, another car, standing a bit further away from them...

“Whose car is that?” He asks suspiciously, pointing at the other vehicle in the driveway.

“Techno's,” Phil replies, leaning over to get Tommy out of his car.

Wilbur quickly turns to him, frowning.

“I thought you lived alone,” he says reproachfully.

Phil smiles with obvious satisfaction, and there's a hint of amusement in his gaze.

“I know you did.”

Wilbur clenches his jaw.

“Oh, don't look at me like that, come on!” Phil laughs, patting him on the shoulder. “Techno wanders off to fuck knows where all the time anyway, so it's not even a lie! And look how, Fundy seems to be having a good time.”

Fundy, indeed, seems to be on a higher level of admiration, staring at the house with big eyes, running up to the tree in the front lawn, as if already trying to figure out how to climb it.

“Cool, right?” Phil asks, clearly very amused by his reaction. “They wanted to bulldoze it, because nobody wanted to buy it. Someone died in it, or something.”

Wilbur's eyes widen, as he turns his head sharply.

“What do you mean '*died*'?!”

And he doesn't like the way Phil just nonchalantly waves his hand in response.

“Oh, you know how it be. And I lived here for almost thirty years, never seen any ghosts. Nothing to be afraid of.”

Wilbur doesn't seem entirely convinced and, as if for his own peace of mind, takes Tommy from Phil.

Tommy just yawns before falling asleep again, resting his head on his shoulder.

Techno opens the door for them, wearing old sweatpants and a T-shirt, his hair tangled and, looking as if he felt extremely offended by their mere existence.

“I was sleeping,” he mutters under his breath, stepping back inside.

“Then I hope you had a nice nap, sweetheart,” Phil responds cheerfully, taking off his shoes at the entrance.

Walking inside, Wilbur feels like he suddenly found himself in a completely different house. Compared to the outside, it feels almost impossibly... *homey*.

The furniture's wooden, clearly worn down over the years. The bookcase filled with books, some clearly marked up after multiple readings. Fresh flowers by the stairs, blankets and pillows scattered across the couch in disarray.

When he peers around the corner into the kitchen, he spots a fridge full of magnets, colorful mugs standing next to the sink, photos on the walls, bright curtains blocking the sun from entering the room.

The living room and kitchen alone are larger than his entire apartment.

Fundy runs in, smile wide and a bit wild, already clutching an 'extremely important' stick in his hand.

“Look!” He runs up to Techno, lifting the stick up. “I have a sword!”

“Oh?” Techno raises his eyebrows, a hint of amusement appearing on his sleepy face.

“Fundy, don't bring that inside,” Wilbur chimes in, stepping back a little with Tommy, just in case, but Phil just waves his hand.

“Nah. This place has seen worse things.” He laughs, looking at Techno, whose ears are slightly

turning red.

“I can help you with your bags. Show you where you'll sleep.”

The stairs creak a little under their feet, and they turn out to be surprisingly steep; Wilbur puts his free hand in the Fundy's back, just to be sure.

“This is my old room,” Techno explains, opening a door on the left side of the hallway.

And sure enough, the bedroom looks as if it has only been occupied by a child for many years, without any adult supervision.

The wallpaper on the walls still shows a few faded marker stains, old posters and stickers.

“I dug up a few old toys, from the attic, but...” He shrugs. “I have no idea what kids these days like.”

“He only needs a stick and some mud, to be honest,” Wilbur says, watching the boy look around the room.

He looks to the side for a moment, discreetly running his fingers over the door frame, where someone has been consistently marking their child's height for years.

The bedroom that Techno offers him, is much smaller than Fundy's, much simpler, and despite the flowers standing on the windowsill, very clearly uninhabited for some time.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Techno remarks. “You can do anything you want with it, I'm sure father won't mind.”

Pushed against one of the one walls is a double bed, covered with pale blanket; the window in the room is covered from the outside almost entirely by the branches of a tree, so close that Wilbur is sure he wouldn't even have to lean out that much to touch it.

He smiles stiffly, as Techno sets his bag down on the floor.

“Ah. And father said to tell you, that Tommy doesn't have to sleep here.” He nods his chin at the cradle next to Wilbur's luggage. “We could-”

“Thanks,” Wilbur interrupts him, perhaps a bit too harshly; he makes up for it with another smile. “Really. But, I guess, I'll be calmer when he sleeps with me. You know?”

Techno nods after a moment's hesitation, looking at Tommy in Wilbur's arms, who only now wakes up a bit, yawning and looking around the room.

“Okay. That's fine. I, uhm...”

He stands awkwardly in the doorway for a moment, staring at Tommy, as if he wants to ask something.

“... I'll leave now. Goodbye,” he says a bit too quickly, disappearing into the hallway.

Wilbur looks down at Tommy, who squirms in his arms.

And then he sits up in bed, on clean, light-colored sheets, in a completely strange room, in this completely strange, strange house.

Ten minutes later, someone knocks on his door, and Phil leans out from behind it, clearly in a much better mood, with Fundy at his side.

“I thought, that maybe you can unpack later. And now, while it's still warm, we can go see the beach.”

He rests a hand on Fundy's hair, as he bounces in place on his feet. “Kid's really excited about it.”

Fundy nods vigorously, grinning.

“I want to see the seals!”

“Why are you so into these seals?” Phil shakes his head, laughing a bit.

“He gets like that, with animals,” Wilbur says, smiling a bit at the sight of his son. “When I took him to a lake once, he only talked about swans...”

The memory of that day evokes a strange, bittersweet feeling.

Because always, fucking always, no matter what, his thoughts come back to her, returning to her face, smile and eyes.

Once, only once, he took Fundy to that lake, and he still remembers how his red hair looked in the sun.

The smile on his face drops slightly.

“Okay. Let's go.” he says, although moving anywhere sounds like the last thing he feels like doing at the moment.

It turns out that this time, Phil really wasn't lying, when he said that they live *'right next to the beach'*.

After just a few minutes of walking, the dry ground beneath their feet turns into sand, covered with conifer needles and small plants.

“The village is the other way,” Phil informs him, grabbing his cane under one arm. “It's harder to set sail from this shore, so fewer fishermen come here. Mostly just people who live around.”

Wilbur nods.

Now, when he looks closely, he can clearly see the blue line of the sea on the horizon, a few sails painting in the distance, and the farther they go, the more clearly he hears the sound of crashing waves.

Fundy looks around, excitedly. Tommy in Wilbur's arms seems much less happy and much more confused, as he looks over the trunks of the thin trees.

“Have you ever been to the beach before?” Techno asks, watching Fundy almost stumble over a pine cone, picking up his pace as they get closer.

“I have! Once!” He replies proudly.

“So I don't need to remind you to take off your shoes, do I?”

The sand beneath their feet gradually clears out as the forest thins out, and Fundy quickly pulls off his sneakers, climbing up the last hill in no time, gasping.

Apart from them, there are several people walking on the beach, but Wilbur almost pays no attention to them.

A much stronger wind blows his hair.

The sea stretches far, turning with the horizon into darker and darker blues. The sun illuminates the of water, reflecting off it, flickering like diamonds.

Fundy immediately runs down the hill, yelling something Wilbur can't quite make out.

But ass soon as he touches the water, he immediately steps back sharply.

“It's cold!” He yells at Phil, clearly offended.

“It's always like that!” The man laughs, also coming down.

Fundy wrinkles his nose, gazing at the waves, as if the ocean was actually going to care about his annoyance.

“Why?”

“Because the seals like it,” Techno replies, smiling slightly, and Fundy's face immediately changes.

And he nods, with all the understanding and seriousness of a five-year-old.

Wilbur's still standing on the hill, holding Tommy and staring straight ahead.

The waves crash against the shore; light foam bounces against wet sand. The ocean hums in his ears, he squints his eyes staring at it seeming endlessness.

It's been so long, since he last saw the sea.

“Wilbur!” Phil waves at him, calling him over with his hand. “Don't just stand there!”

Beside him, Fundy crouches down, his fingers skimming over the smooth sand.

As he joins them, Phil laughs, leaning a bit to look closer at Tommy.

“You like the beach, sweetie?” He taps the tip of his nose with a finger.

Tommy looks around, staring at the waves and the seagulls flying overhead.

“I think he's a bit overwhelmed,” Wilbur says, brushing a few fair hairs back from his brother's forehead.

Fundy stands up suddenly, something clenched in his hand.

“For you!” He announces, pressing one chipped seashell into Wilbur's hand.

“Oh.”

“And for you, and for you!” He pushes the other tow to Phil and Techno.

“Aw, thank you,” Phil ruffles his hair.

Techno just stares at the shell for a moment, like he's sure if it's really for him, eventually tucking it gently into his pocket.

“And Tommy doesn't get one! Because he woke me up tonight, and I'm mad.”

An hour later, Wilbur sets his seashell down on the nightstand, sitting down on the bed.

When he stares out the window, looking through the leaves, he's able to see the outline of the sea on the horizon.

And even if in the warm atmosphere of this house, somewhat messy and chaotic in the way that only houses that are full with life, love and memories can be, Wilbur just feels so lonely - nobody needs to know.

Chapter End Notes

slaps chapter this bad boy can fit so many *** in it

Early chapter cuz I'm going on a vacation wow

Also cut this one short, cuz like. I really hated it lol. The next two are gonna be extra long for that tho

Hasta Mañana

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When he wakes up the next morning, it takes him a moment to remember where he is, and why the walls of his room are suddenly so clean and bright.

And when it finally hits him, he just sighs heavily and rolls over.

Tree branches rustle, moved by the wind, and he can hear the soft chirping of birds from outside the window. The old clock on the wall hits nine, lazily.

Wilbur has no desire to get out of bed. If it were up to him, he would spend the rest of the day right here, buried in the bedsheets. And even better: the next entire three months.

And sure, maybe he's being dramatic.

Maybe he bit off more than he could chew, and now has to swallow, no matter how much it burns his throat, or how bitter it tasted on his tongue.

Maybe he should focus on how excited about everything Fundy is, maybe he should at least finally show a little gratitude.

But deep down, he still feels embarrassed, tired, out of place.

And maybe, in the privacy of this room, with the leaves of the tree and the outline of the sea outside the window, he can afford to be.

Just for now.

He can't, he realizes a few minutes later, when Tommy starts crying.

It's almost an hour later, when Phil finally knocks on his door, looking into his room.

“Did you sleep well?” He asks, and although Wilbur appreciates his efforts, his visible enthusiasm makes him almost wince.

“Yeah,” he mutters in response, chin resting in his hands, elbows propped against Tommy's cradle.

Phil also leans over the baby, that soft, affectionate look on his face.

“Aw, and what about you, sweetie? You didn't even cry that much!”

“He must have been exhausted,” Wilbur says, watching Phil brush back hair from Tommy's forehead carefully.

“We normally get up earlier,” he tells him a moment later, as they go down the stairs together. “I always have some work to do at home, and Techno...”

Suddenly his face changes to something distinctly bitter and slightly irritated.

“To hell with Techno,” he waves his hand, as if trying to scare away an extremely intrusive fly. “He disappears for entire days, says he goes to *‘work’*, but he doesn't want to tell me where... You give up everything to raise them, and this is the treatment you get. Yeah, sure, go ahead, I'm just an old man... Kids,” here he looks at Wilbur, and adds, in a bit more lighthearted tone, “are a very ungrateful investment.”

Wilbur's *‘ungrateful investment’* is already sitting at the kitchen table, next to Techno, finishing a bowl of cereal.

He smiles at him, legs swinging in the air, still not reaching the ground from the chair.

“Slept well?” He ruffles his son's hair.

“Yeah! I had a dream about dinosaurs!”

“Mhm. Sounds lovely.”

He leans down a bit, kissing the top of his head.

And Phil must have noticed the way he was glancing away longingly at the coffee machine, because he's immediately asking:

“What kind of coffee do you want?”

“Strong one,” he replies, taking his seat at the table, and propping Tommy on his lap.

Now, he's actually able to take a closer look at the kitchen and the photos hanging on the walls.

He recognizes the boy in most of the photographs, as the same one he saw in Phil's car. Smile wide, with dark hair, eyes, and a long scar on his face.

On a swing, on a boat, with a way too big, green hat on his head, in a navy blue uniform with a red backpack.

That boy, who grew up to finally be the man sitting next to him at the table.

But now, finishing some cheep energy drink, with of pink hair sliding out from a lazy bun, in a white, unbuttoned shirt, Techno looks much less threatening than he remembers.

A bit less like someone you would meet at a club in a shady part of town, and more like someone tired, sleepy but still listening to Fundy talking about of dinosaurs.

Phil sets a cup of coffee in front of him, just as Fundy drinks the last bit of milk from the bottom of the bowl.

“Can I play outside?” He asks, shifting impatiently on the seat.

Wilbur looks at him.

“When you get dressed. And don't go outside the fence.”

He's not sure if Fundy is more disappointed with the limitations of his plans of destruction, or the fact that he won't be able to roll on the grass in his pajamas, but he jumps off the chair, running up the stairs anyway.

“I’ll get the mail,” Techno says, also standing up, setting the empty can on the table a bit too abruptly.

Phil flinches suddenly, and Techno gives him a weirdly apologetic look.

Even so, he seems to be in an exceptionally good mood, smiling slightly to himself.

After a moment he comes back, closing the door behind him, a handful of letters in his hand, and sits down next to Phil. Who almost instinctively brushes loose strands of pink hair from his face, tucking it behind his ear.

They sit close, arms almost touching, clearly engrossed in their usual morning routine.

And Phil's eyes don't look cold, when he looks at his son.

Wilbur's jaw tightens, as he stares down at his cup with a silly, fish pattern.

Techno flips the mail around for a moment, when suddenly Phil grabs his elbow, stopping him.

“Oh! That's for me.”

He quickly grabs one decorative envelope and puts it away in his jacket.

Techno smirks.

“From your girlfriend?”

Phil blushes suddenly. And even in his weird, sleek suit, he suddenly looks much more like an embarrassed teenager.

“She's not my *girlfriend*. Just... A friend.”

“You have a girlfriend?” Wilbur asks, feeling equally surprised and intrigued.

“I *don't*-”

“He does. She's from America. And they write letters to each other. And hers are always scented.” Techno leans over the table, adding a bit quieter. “And father wants to ask her to marry him-”

“Techno!”

The tips of Phil's ears are completely red now, and he sits at the table with all the awkwardness and embarrassment, that only men who are truly in love can experience.

Wilbur raises his eyebrows.

“Is that her, on that picture on your car?”

His mind goes back for a moment, to the woman in the photo with long, dark hair.

Techno smiles even wider.

“You have *a picture* of her in your-”

“And what are you, a cop? That's my business, and no kids are going to fucking question me.” He gets up from his chair. “Goodbye.”

And, turning on his heel, he leaves the room, holding the letter to his chest.

He looks back at him for a moment, then glances back at Techno.

The tense atmosphere that usually formed between them, is now giving away to Wilbur's amusement and, simple, ordinary human curiosity.

“Is he really going to propose?” He asks, and Techno just shrugs.

“No idea. I'm just teasing him.”

A question arises on his tongue, but then he presses his lips together, unsure whether it is really appropriate to ask.

Techno, however, seems to notice his gaze, shifting towards the photos hanging on the wall.

Photographs of just him and Phil.

“I mean, that makes sense. I guess. You know, I was wondering about that. Well,” he laughs softly, “you and Phil aren't exactly *similar*-”

The smile disappears from Techno's face.

“Kristin isn't my mother, if that what you think,” he replies, his voice suddenly much colder, and yet Wilbur feels his face burn.

“O-oh. I'm sorry, I thought-”

“Yeah. You *did*.” Techno interrupts him, waving his hand. “Whatever.”

Wilbur purses his lips, feeling the heavy, awkward tension fall between them again.

“Maybe you should go for a walk,” Techno says, getting up from the table. “It'll do you good.”

Wilbur's not entirely sure if it was meant to be a real suggestion, or a strange form of an insult, but Phil seems weirdly excited about the idea, when he meets him in the hallway by his bedroom.

“Oh, you'll see, you'll love the countryside! It's really beautiful here. And don't worry about the kids, we'll take care of everything!”

And before Wilbur's even able to protest in any way, he's suddenly out the door, with Phil waving him goodbye.

As it turns out, Phil's and Techno's house, while certainly the strangest, is by no means the most *'creative'* building in the area.

Walking along the road, separated from the beach only by a small piece of forest and sand dunes, he can mostly see cottages, some with roofs so low that, they almost seem sunken into the ground, with wooden fences, colorful shutters and door frames.

People pass him, watch him closely, and he realizes that to the locals, he must seem as out of place as he feels.

The beach, although similar to the one a little closer to their home, definitely feels more populated.

In addition to the boats, laying on the shore next to fishing nets, Wilbur notices more people, soaking their feet in the water, or even some braver ones, swimming deeper into the sea.

He takes off his shoes, feeling the hot sand under his feet.

The area is indeed, as Phil promised, extremely charming. And maybe if Wilbur wasn't losing his own mind at the moment, he would even be able to appreciate it.

But now, his heart sinks heavily in his chest, his throat tightens as he stares far away at the ship sails, looming on the horizon.

Because right now, all he can think about is how much Phil has done for him.

Maybe he had the money, now he could tell for sure, from looking at their house, but it didn't make him feel any better about it.

While Fundy and Tommy deserved everything the world had to offer, deep down he still feels, that he very much does not deserve the level of kindness and care Phil has shown him.

He hates himself for the jealousy he feels, when he sometimes looks at Phil and Techno. Because Phil has done so much for him, and Wilbur will never be able to repay him for it, and the last thing he should want right now, is more.

He sits down heavily on one of the wooden poles, the tips of them sticking out in the sand, hiding his face in his hands.

Wilbur's tired, and he misses his frail world on a mountain made of sand, when he could still pretend he doesn't need anything.

“Fish die from sadness!”

Wilbur shudders, puling his head up, placing a hand on his chest.

“*Fuck!*”

The girl, who seems to have appeared by his side out of nowhere, laughs softly.

“Sorry, sir. Didn't mean to scare you.”

Wilbur closes his eyes for a moment, takes a deep breath, trying to calm his beating heart.

“It's okay, just... Don't sneak up on people like that.”

She smiles apologetically at him.

She looks young, even younger than him, with a slim face, reddened cheeks, and pale pink hair covered with a straw hat. She holds a plastic shopping bag in one hand, and smooths out her long skirt with the other.

In fact, she looks so ordinary, that if you ignore the obvious habit of talking to strangers, at first glance, she could even be considered quite sane and normal.

She sits down next to him, adjusting her hat, either unaware of the fact that the wood is almost completely wet, or not caring about it, just like him.

“What does it mean? About the fish,” Wilbur asks, watching her closely.

“My dad always says, that you can't be sad on the beach, or all the fish are gonna die.” She waves her hand, almost casually. “And did look quite miserable there, sir. No offense.”

Wilbur's not entirely sure if he's more offended, or just admires her honesty.

“You're not from here, are you?” She asks, and Wilbur shakes his head

“Not. And don't call me sir, I'm not that old yet.”

“And how old are you?” She smiles, at the sight of his surprised face. “What? I'm not asking about your salary.”

Wilbur stares at her for a moment, stunned.

Then he bursts out laughing.

'Normal', seems to be a rare trait in this area.

“Twenty-five,” he replies, rolling his eyes as the girl dramatically places a hand over her chest.

“That's already halfway there! You have your casket ready?”

“Okay, okay, shut up, child-”

The girl chuckles, as she extends her hand.

“I'm Niki.”

He shakes her hand, smiling.”

“Wilbur.”

Now, that he's able to take a little closer at her, she feels strangely familiar. Something about her colorful hair and straw hat brings back a memory, from the back of his head.

“I've seen you before,” he recalls. “On the beach, the other day.”

Niki smiles, as she tucks her hair behind her ears.

“Yeah. I remembered you, too. You had a really cute baby.”

Wilbur, weirdly, feels himself smiling.

“That's my brother. The older one is mine. The one-”

“The one with red hair?”

His smile drops a little, his lips pressed tightly together. He nods, looking away from her.

“Are you on vacation?” She asks, after a bit of silence, and he nods.

For a moment, Niki digs in the sand with the sole of her shoe, as if she was thinking about something, opening and closing her mouth every now and then. Her face is a little redder than it was a moment ago.

“You were with Phil,” she finally says, clearly hesitant.

Wilbur raises his eyebrows.

“You know Phil?”

“Everyone does,” she replies, tilting her head to the side, almost touching her cheek to her tanned shoulder.

“I mean, he is my... *uncle*.”

The words still feel weird in his mouth. But it's still much easier than a few months ago, when he was a complete stranger.

Niki raises her eyebrows, seeming genuinely puzzled.

“O-oh,” she just says, nervously twisting a bit of her hair around her finger.

“What?”

“Nothing, just... I thought he didn't have any family. Well, apart from Techno. That's what I heard, at least.” She frowns thoughtfully.

They're both silent for a moment, Wilbur titling his head as he stares at the seagulls flying over them.

“Well, anyway, I have to go.”

The girl stands up, adjusting her skirt. An easy, natural smile appears on her face again.

“I need to take these home. But it was nice talking. Be careful there, I heard their house was like, haunted or something. Bye!”

“Wait, what do you mean *haunted*-”

But Niki is already turning around, laughing, waving him goodbye.

When he comes home an hour later, sweaty, sand in his shoes and hair, Phil greets him from the kitchen.

“Techno and Fundy are in the garden, if you're looking for them,” he says, as Wilbur leans against the door frame, watching the man stir something in a pot, leaning over the stove.

Wilbur doesn't answer for a moment, just staring at him.

Niki's words, that weird girl, that he only exchanged a few sentences with, still linger in the back of his head. Like heavy clouds, obscuring other thoughts.

'I thought he didn't have a family.'

Phil turns to face him, eyebrows raised. Wilbur opens his mouth, then closes it.

He's not sure if he's actually more afraid to ask the question itself, or of the fact that he can actually get an answer.

“Can I ask you something?” He says finally.

Phil, though clearly puzzled, moves away from the stove, wiping his hands on a towel, and reaches towards the radio on the counter, silencing the melody of a familiar song, that Wilbur will only associate with his car for the rest of his life.

“Of course,” He smiles, still a bit hesitant but encouraging.

“You...”

Phil's eyes are staring at him intently. But they are not cold and so different, and yet exactly the same as his mother's.

Phil doesn't rush him, doesn't stop him, lets him slowly choose the right words.

“... You knew my grandparents. I mean!” He makes a strange gesture with his hand, almost hitting himself in the face. “Of course you did, they're your parents. But just...”

He bites his lip for a moment, staring down at his damp socks, which still have sand sticking to them.

“Mom never liked to talk about them. And I know they're dead, but I just... I never knew them.”

Only then, does he look up again.

Phil is staring at him.

Suddenly, Wilbur realizes he can't read his face. His eyes seem blurry and intense at the same time, as if he can see something more through it, his thoughts returning elsewhere. Eyebrows slightly frowned, fingers tight on the towel.

He turns his head, looking out the window.

“Sometimes, I feel like I never knew them, too.” He says, and they're sad words, but Wilbur doesn't dare to doubt them.

For sorrow is the most truthful of all feelings, and he learned that a long time ago, when his heart ached for the first time.

He finds Fundy and Techno in the backyard. His son greets him with a wide smile, waving at him vigorously.

“Dad!”

A swing hangs between the trees at the back of the house. Old and stripped of paint, hung on thick strings between green leaves and grass, like a warm, childhood memory.

Fundy's feet don't touch the ground, when sitting on it.

“I have a wand! See?” The 'wand' turns out to be the very long stick he brought with him the day before. “Techno said it's cool!”

Techno, sitting on the ground with his head resting on a tree trunk, and clearly already a bit asleep, murmurs something in response.

“Can't disagree.”

Brushing his son's hair from his forehead, he glances at Techno. And then he stares at the ground again, tiny daisies growing between it.

Phil's words still linger in the back of his head. The question comes to his mind, at the tip of his tongue.

He doesn't say anything.

Not then, when Fundy starts telling him about all the cool abilities of her new weapon.

But that evening, when Techno leans into his room for a moment, mumbling a soft 'Night', Wilbur stops him for a moment.

“Can I ask you a question?” He says, for the second time that day.

Techno raises his eyebrows, but stops, awkwardly standing in the doorway. After a moment, he nods.

“Shoot.”

“And you won't get all grumpy with me?” he asks, only half joking.

Techno purses his lips a little as he looks away.

“Only if it's stupid.”

Wilbur rests his elbows on the sides of Tommy's cradle, one hand brushing away the hair from the boy's forehead.

“Have you ever met our grandparents?”

With Techno, these words pass through his throat much easier, but he still tenses up involuntarily, when Techno grunts softly.

“No,” he replies. “They died a long time ago, and father didn't really talk about them that much. I don't think they got along very well.”

“Oh.”

“Why are you asking me this?”

Wilbur's not sure how to answer that.

At first, he explained it to himself with ordinary human curiosity, and this stupid inability to mind his own business. Now, however, he slowly gets the impression, that there may be more to it.

His mother was the one family he ever has before Fundy was born, and although there was this strange urge to the back of his head at times, longing for something he didn't know, it was easy to

push it down most of the time.

Now, this strange, unknown part of his life stood before him in the form of Techno and Phil, and he realized, that while it was still hard to think of them in that way, it was nice to imagine that there was some other reality.

That maybe somewhere else, some other version of Wilbur, grew up calling Phil his uncle, drawing colorful cards at his grandparent's house.

But Wilbur, this real and the only one, leaning over his brother's cradle, is an orphan and would never be that other Wilbur.

“I don't know.”

Techno looks at him closely for a moment.

“I think he has some old photos. He'll show you, if you ask.”

Wilbur looks at a man who, perhaps in another lifetime, he wouldn't hesitate to call his cousin, and smiles stiffly.

“Thanks. I will.”

He doesn't.

At least, not for now.

Over the next two days, Wilbur learns that the weather near the sea, tends to not only be extremely hot and steamy, but also windy and downright unbearable.

And while he would prefer to find out about in a slightly different way, then losing his favorite hat to the wind, and while the constant feeling of sand in his shoes and hair is slowly becoming really bothersome, he quickly realizes that he's very much alone in that feeling.

While it's easy to assume that Phil and Techno are just used to this kind of absurdity in the weather, it's hard for him not to feel betrayed by his own son.

Because not only does Fundy become very found of disgustingly cold water, he apparently also assumes, that his father should go through the same torments.

And it's hard for Wilbur to say no.

This time, not only because Fundy was his only, beloved child and watching him laugh and run around the shore, trying to jump over the waves, was perhaps worth picking out sand from underneath his fingernails the next day.

But also because the walls of that old house, still felt oddly overwhelming to him. Photos of people he didn't know, stains on the couch from accidents he wasn't there for, an old swing in the garden.

Everything still gave him that strange, numb feeling, and that conversation with Phil still played at the back of his mind at times, when he stared at the white ceiling, lying in bed at night.

It's difficult to define it, maybe something between longing, regret and years of ignorance piling up, all trying to over scream each other.

But when Fundy tugged on his arm, jumping up and down, ending each sentence with “Please, please, pretty please!”, for those brief moments, it all didn't matter.

And for a moment, just for a moment, he could pretend everything is as it used to be.

Forget about his grandparents, Phil, his mother, fucking Sally.

Forget that in this old, painfully unfamiliar house, his brother is still waiting for him.

Because for those brief moments, it was just him and Fundy again, and there was still the faint memory of his old world, built on a mountain made of sand in the back of his head.

“I want to build a *dam!*” Fundy insists, leaning over him

Wilbur pulls the hat he borrowed from Phil over his face, as he stretches out on the towel.

The sky is cloudless, and the sun falls on his skin, warm, fuzzy and sleepy.

Though, that feeling may have something to do with the fact that he spent half the night rocking a crying baby in his arms.

And when Phil finally managed to convince him to let him handle Tommy, he still insisted on staying with them for the rest of the night.

Tommy seemed so reassuringly familiar, amidst everything that was going on inside his head.

“You can't build a dam in a sea,” he says, and doesn't even need to see him, to know what face Fundy is making.

“Yes I can! And I'll be the biggest dam ever!”

Wilbur feels himself smiling.

“Damn. That's crazy.”

As it turns out, trying to build a dam to the sea is a bit of a futile task, which, obviously, doesn't stop Fundy.

And somewhere between watching the boy persistently digging in the sand, and the warm sun shining on his face, he closes his eyes for a moment, breathing deeply.

Only for a short moment, because he's a responsible parent, and would never leave his child unattended, even if he is very tired, the constant sound of the water calms his thoughts, and the warm sand suddenly feels extremely comfortable-

Fundy wakes him up, by nudging his side with his foot.

“Don't sleep!”

“I'm not, I'm not,” he murmurs in response, rubbing his eyes with his hand.

“Come to see our dam!”

Wilbur sighs heavily, but doesn't get up until the second nudge.

He rests his elbows on the towel, squinting as he adjusts his hat.

The '*dam*' turns out to be a long tunnel, half filled with sand, which looks more like an accident than a feature, judging by the still visible footprints.

It's not this pinnacle of architecture that catches Wilbur's attention.

But a boy, standing on the other side of the tunnel, watching carefully as a long wave fills it with water, spilling over the sides.

He might be six or seven at the most, dark hair falling slightly over his eyes. On his hands, the skin is clearly paler in some places, white patches spreading up his body to the face.

He looks up. His eyes are big, with different colors, sharp and piercing, even as he stares at Wilbur for the moment with obvious surprise and fear.

Wilbur almost immediately associates it with a scared animal, and perhaps that comparison is somewhat mean, but extremely accurate.

“Oh. Who's that, your friend?” He looks at Fundy, who nods vigorously.

“Yeah! And he helped me build the dam. Look how big it is!”

The boy nods uncertainly, still staring at Wilbur.

He's clearly cringing inside, as if unsure of what to do with himself, and in this he reminds him so much of Fundy, that Wilbur can't help but smile sincerely at him.

“What's your name?” He asks, fully sitting down on the towel.

“I don't know!” Fundy says, gracefully jumping over to the other side of the tunnel, to stand next to his friend, almost flooding his dam again in the process. “He doesn't talk.”

And indeed, the boy stays silent, nervously twisting a part of his T-shirt in his hands.

And something tightens in Wilbur's throat.

“O-oh,” he finally gasps, quickly bringing a smile back to his face. “That's... That's fine. Show me what else you got there.”

And Fundy doesn't need to be told twice (usually, except when it comes to brushing his teeth).

And each time Wilbur hears another long, complex story about a shapeless pile of sand, that Fundy calls a '*fortress*', his new friends clearly seems to relax a bit more.

When it finally stops looking like he's trying to disappear into the ground, Wilbur notices that he's really tall for his age, with awkwardly long limbs.

And that he looks weirdly familiar, when he starts smiling.

Wilbur glances at him from time to time, with that strange familiarity, that he can't quite place.

“And this is our army of foxes!” While saying this, Fundy points to several dry pieces of wood lying on the ground

“Why foxes?”

Fundy looks at him, like he has just fatally offended not only him, but the entire earth population of foxes.

But before he can explain his obvious stupidity and ignorance to him, there's a familiar voice coming from behind them.

“Ranboo!”

Wilbur quickly turns and immediately recognizes her pink hair, messy and a bit wet, the straw hat she's holding in her hand.

She opens her mouth, but stops for a moment, looking down to her other hand. Or rather: the child she's holding close with it.

Niki quickly reaches the boy, kneeling down beside him, pulling him closer.

“God bless, you're gonna give me a heart attack one day.” With her free hand, she grabs his face, turns it both ways, brushes the sand off his T-shirt. “Are you okay?”

The boy, Ranboo, nods.

Her face is flushed and sweaty, but she's still staring at him with obvious relief.

Which, soon, gives away to anger.

“I told you to not wonder off.” She stands up, resting her hand on her hip. “And what did you do?”

Ranboo, who doesn't seem to be too concerned about it, merely shrugs, then nods his head at Fundy.

Niki's eyes widen a bit, as if she's only now realizing the presence of the other two. She adjusts the sleeping baby, leaning against her shoulder, looking at Wilbur.

“Oh! Gee, how good to see you. I'm really sorry, I told him to stay close, but you know how it is. You will leave them alone for five minutes and...”

Looking at her, and then at the boy, suddenly this strange sense of familiarity makes sense.

There's something very similar in their facial features, even in the same warm but sharp gaze.

Something in his stomach tightens painfully.

“He's yours?” He asks, looking at the baby in her arms, wrapped in a green blanket.

Niki raises her eyebrows, clearly surprised, but then laughs.

“Oh, no, no! Ranboo is my brother.” She adjusts the tiny bundle in her hands. “And I only babysit the little one.”

Thank god, Wilbur thinks, looking at her young face.

Niki smiles as she pushes the baby slightly away from her shoulder.

The little boy might be Tommy's age, deeply asleep, clutching a tiny hand on the fabric of Niki's

blouse.

“He's called Tubbo,” she says. “I've been looking after him for a month or so. Adorable, isn't he?”

Suddenly, her eyes sharpen, and she looks again at Ranboo, who's now making more fox armies with Fundy.

“And don't you think you got away with it. You're grounded.”

The boy just smiles, reaching quickly into the pockets of his shorts.

He pulls out a handful of rocks, carefully selecting one and putting his hand out towards Niki.

“I told you to stop playing with dirt,” she says, but takes the stone from him, and Wilbur notices how her face softens a bit.

After a moment of obvious hesitation, Ranboo extends his other hand towards Fundy.

They walk with them to the village, Fundy clearly very happy, holding the gray rock tightly in one hand.

Niki's looking a little less pleased.

Though she still seems angry and nervous, the tension visibly disappears over time, as she engages Wilbur into a simple conversation.

“Sorry again...” she says, but Wilbur interrupts her with a wave of his hand.

“It's fine. And, well, Fundy found a friend.”

Fundy, walking a little ahead of them, though still staring at Niki uncertainly, whispers something in Ranboo's ear with obvious excitement.

“Oh, yeah, but still... Ranboo, you still own me an apology.”

Ranboo looks at her, clearly reluctantly turning away from Fundy. He tightens his hand into a fist, quickly drawing a circle over his chest before turning back to the other boy.

Niki sighs softly.

“You work as a nanny?” He asks, looking at the baby on her shoulders again.

“Kind of. I work for Puffy, have you meet her?”

Wilbur frowns.

“No?”

Niki smiles.

“You will soon, trust me.”

“Is this a threat, or a warning?”

Niki looks like she's thinking for a moment, pouting her lips.

“Both,” she finally says.

The weather has cooled off a bit, and Wilbur is throwing on his old hoodie.

Tall, thin trees cast long shadows as the sun slowly sets.

“Do you like it here?” Niki asks, watching Wilbur stare at the still visible blue line of the sea.

“It's...”

And it's hard to answer.

He certainly feels uncomfortable, alienated, and yet so close to something he never knew he was missing.

Right at his fingertips, and yet he always pulls back himself, as if burned.

As if hurt just by the thought that the life he wants might never really come true, as if the very thought of feeling safe meant something dangerous. That it'll end the same way as every other time.

That he would end up all alone, with his little son, and be completely unprepared for it all over again.

Deep down, something tells him, that it's a rather absurd thought, that although Phil is so similar to his mother, he's also so much different.

But arriving at logical conclusions had to start with logical thinking, and the more he thought about it, the more it tightened in his throat, the more his breathing quickened.

The more often he covered his mouth with his hand at night, his cheeks wet.

“It's okay,” he says instead.

Niki just smiles.

And while she has no right to know what's really behind those words, her smile is strangely comforting.

On the way home, Fundy hangs on his shoulder, looking clearly unhappy for having to say goodbye to Ranboo.

“But I can visit him?”

“Do you know where he lives?”

Fundy puffs his cheeks and Wilbur laughs, ruffling his hair.

“Yes. I'm sure Niki won't mind.”

“That's good.” With the tip of his shoe, he kicks one stone on the path. “Because I want to invite him to my birthday.”

Wilbur freezes. Just for a moment.

“Oh. Yes, of course,” he says anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Eyyy got stuck in a train for 5h today, crazy time

Also haven't done much work on vacation. But I'll try to keep the weekly uploads!

Dancing Queen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Fundy's birthday.

To be fair, it was perhaps the first time in his life, that this date had completely disappeared from his mind.

He was pretty sure he would have remembered it anyway, in a day or two, by glancing at the calendar or even the reminders on his phone.

But still, the very thought of forgetting it, even just for a moment, makes something in his stomach clench painfully.

For the past few months, his mind had been a tangle of nerves and confusion, so much that there were days when he found it hard to focus on anything, let alone something really important.

Like your own son's birthday.

That night, he rolled over for hours in bed, throwing away the covers and pulling them back over him, feeling the sweat on the inside of his knees. Eventually, he sighs, glancing again at Tommy's cradle, and stands up.

Tiptoes into Fundy's room, carefully stepping on the old floor, and gently opens the door.

And for a moment, he just stares at the sleeping boy, red hair scattered on the pillow, toys on the carpet, a tiny collection of seashells, feathers, and stones on the bed, with the one Ranboo gave him in its place of honor.

Suddenly, a cold hand falls on his shoulder.

A shiver passes through him, he turns abruptly, feeling his whole body tighten, quickly covering his mouth with his hand-

Phil looks at him, apologetically.

“Sorry,” he whispers. “I didn't mean to scare you.”

Wilbur sighs heavily, closing his eyes for a moment, still feeling his heart pounding in his chest.

“It's alright. Just...”

“Are you scared of ghosts?”

Wilbur rolls his eyes, at his obvious amusement.

“I mean, you said someone *did* die here...”

Phil's face changes to something serious for a moment, looking over Wilbur's shoulder.

“Can't sleep?”

Wilbur sighs, as he takes one last look at Fundy, and carefully closes the door.

“No.” He admits, honestly.

It's hard to see the details in the dark, but his eyes look strangely tired, and suddenly Phil looks much older.

Maybe it's the shadow falling over his face, maybe the way he looks the other way for a moment, somewhat absent.

Maybe it's because in moments like this, when he's not wearing his jackets, shirts and far too fancy outfits, he can see scars on his arms, pale, old, and deep.

Phil rubs the back of his neck with his hand, rubbing his wrist against the long mark along his jaw.

“Yeah, same.” He suddenly smiles again, looking at Wilbur. “Well, what are you thinking about?”

Wilbur runs a hand through his hair, sighing softly.

“Fundy's birthday.”

Phil raises his eyebrows.

“I didn't know it was his birthday soon.”

“Uhm. Me neither. I mean...” He runs his hand over his face, feeling the guilt build up again. “I kind of... forgot about it.”

Phil's silent, still staring at him, though Wilbur stubbornly looks everywhere but at the other man.

For a moment, he seems to be waiting for something. But when Wilbur doesn't say anything more, the corners of his mouth twitch slightly, and even though he covers his mouth immediately with his hand, it is hard to hide the obvious shaking of his shoulders.

Wilbur feels his cheeks flush.

“What?” He mumbles

And he folds his arms over his chest, feeling very much like a child in elementary school, mocked by his friends, because apparently nobody bothered to inform him over the summer, that wearing a bicycle helmet is no longer *'cool'*.

Phil just shakes his head, and while he's nothing like any of the boys from his old school, Wilbur can't deny that he *is* a bit offended.

“Nothing, nothing,” Phil finally says, laughing softly. “You always...” He makes a weird gesture with his hand. “Care. So much.”

Wilbur frowns.

“And that's bad?”

“No, of course not. It's just... I'm scared, that if you ever accidentally leave the kid in a store like any parent, you're gonna shoot yourself.”

Wilbur opens his mouth, then closes it.

Not that he didn't want to talk back.

He does, especially when the man shakes his head again, smiling stupidly. But it's just too hard to tell, if what he had just been told was a strange form of compliment, or an insult.

Before he can say anything, Phil speaks again.

“When is his birthday?”

Minutes later, when Wilbur finally returns to bed, carefully walking past Tommy's cradle, Phil's words are still stuck in the back of his head.

Though he's not exactly sure why.

As if there was something more in them, that he's not quite able to understand.

Or maybe there wasn't. Maybe he's making it too deep, maybe he's just very tired.

Maybe he should stop wasting his nights staring at walls.

Four days pass, and as the weekend starts, Fundy seems visibly more and more excited.

On Friday evening, he's almost bursting with energy at the table, every now and then nudging Techno with his leg on the knee, until the man finally grabs his leg, holding it up.

“You look like you're about to explode.” He says, and although his tone is a bit harsh, his face looks gentle.

“Time is moving too slow,” Fundy replies quickly; shifts in the chair again. “Why doesn't time move faster?”

“Time is a social construct,” Phil replies not very helpfully, taking a sip of his tea.

Fundy puffs up his cheeks, like every very mature boy who's turning six in a few hours, wrapping his arms around his knees, as Techno lets go of his leg.

“Then that *'social'* is a *dick*.”

Wilbur chokes on his tea.

He sets the cup down abruptly, staring at his son with wide eyes.

Phil covers his mouth with his hand, trying not to smile.

“Fundy! Where did you hear that?”

The boy looks at him, with a clearly uninterested expression. As if the question asked was not only extremely stupid, but also wasting his very precious time.

“From you.”

Phil laughs, as he watches Wilbur's face turn red, including the very tips of his ears.

“You must have misheard me,” he says sharply.

Fundy, visibly encouraged by Phil's bending in half laughing, straightens up in his chair, lifting his chin.

“I didn't! You were talking to Niki and you said Techno is a real *dic-*”

Wilbur stands up from his seat, quickly covering the boy's mouth with his hand.

“I'm a what?” Techno looks at them, and while he tries to appear indifferent, Wilbur has already learned to notice how the corners of his mouth turn a bit, with obvious amusement.

“Nothing,” Wilbur replies, ignoring the way Fundy struggles in his grip, trying to bite his hand.

He looks down at his kid, who has clearly decided to try out a different tactic, and winces at the feeling of a tongue on his hand.

“Ew.” He pulls his hand away, and Fundy smiles triumphantly.

“It doesn't matter who said it, you can't go around repeating this sort of stuff.” He leans down, lightly squeezing his son's cheeks between his fingers

“No, no,” Phil finally manages to say; his face is red, but he smiles, as he looks at Fundy. “He can swear as much as he wants.”

“No fuckin-” He blushes when Techno laughs. “I mean. No way.”

Fundy smiles even wider.

“I can?”

“No!” Wilbur replies immediately, just as Phil says:

“Of course.”

They stare at each other for a moment, Wilbur frowning, Phil smiling innocently.

“He's my son,” he says, trying to sound so serious as possible with the baby still trying to wiggle out of in his embrace.

“Sure. But as long as he lives under my roof, he can swear as much as he wants. Right, Fundy?”

“*Fuck!*”

“NO-”

Wilbur comes outside, before Niki even reaches the house.

It has less to do with actual politeness, and a lot more to do with the fact that Fundy hasn't stopped pulling on his sleeve since he saw them from the window, but the girl smiles at him nonetheless.

Fundy hardly left his side since Wilbur woke him up that morning with much appreciated hot

chocolate.

But as the first wave of excitement subsided, with the reassurance that yes, everyone knew by now that he was, in fact, six years old, Fundy seemed to become more nervous.

Holding his hand, hiding behind his legs, quickly glancing out the window, adjusting the cutlery on the table once again.

“Do you think he'll like it?” He asked hesitantly, switching the position of the knives and forks once more, and Wilbur felt that familiar warmth somewhere around his chest.

“It's your party,” he said, brushing some hair back from his son's forehead.

Fundy just pouted, resting his elbows on the table.

“I know. But I really want him to like me...”

“I'm sure he already likes you.”

“I'm sure he *really* won't care,” Techno interjected, completely uninvited.

And though Wilbur looked at him sharply, there was probably some truth to those words.

Because although Niki's glancing at the house a few times, with a slightly uneasy expression, Ranboo ran out in front of her, waving at Fundy.

“I baked a cake,” Niki says, lifting the paper package she's holding in her arms.

Wilbur slows down for a moment, letting her fully walk up to him.

“But-”

“Oh no, it's nothing, really,” she waves her hand. “I love to bake, my pleasure.”

“But we already have a cake.”

Niki pauses for a moment. A light blush appears on her face.

“O-oh. Well then.”

She looks down at the birthday boy himself, who at the moment seems much more concerned with the new stones in Ranboo's collection, than with kind of pastries.

“Then we'll have two cakes,” she finally says, and Wilbur just smiles with a shrug.

Niki's cake looks much better on their kitchen table, than the one already standing in their fridge.

Not only because neither Phil, nor Wilbur are very good at baking, but as it turns out, the baker they bought from isn't either. Or at least: not as good as Niki.

And before he can even think of a suitable compliment, Fundy decides to help him out.

Where in this case, the word 'save' means testing some of the frosting with your fingers.

“Fundy!” He scolds him immediately, but Niki only laughs.

“Well, I'm glad- Oh, good morning, Mr. Minecraft.”

Wilbur turns to see Phil walk in the kitchen with Tommy in his arms. He grimaces.

“I told you, don't call me-”

“Oh, I know, I know. Sorry.” She smiles apologetically and Phil just shakes his head.

And only then, he seems to notice that there's more cake in their kitchen than a few hours ago, because his eyes widen a bit.

“You brought a cake?”

“The more, the merrier,” Niki says, while Fundy and Ranboo lick more frosting from their fingers.

Techno doesn't seem to share the same opinion though, because when both cakes finally land on the table in the living room, for a moment he just stares at them very intensely, with a hard-to-read expression.

“What?” Wilbur finally asks.

Techno looks at him, lips tightening slightly.

“Is this a good time to say, that I also bought a cake?”

Wilbur can't say he's a fan of birthdays.

Certainly not his own, not since he was a child, since the time Christmas had lost all of its magic as well.

However, Fundy's birthday is something else.

Fundy deserved everything. The three cakes, a pile of presents that Wilbur would never be able to give him. Which didn't mean, that he never wanted to try.

The less time he thought about his own birthday, the more time he had for Fundy. And the more time he had for Fundy, the less he thought about his birthday.

It's a win-win in his mind, really.

Definitely.

And, maybe, someone else would find something sad about it.

In how much he tries to deny his own past, like looking at someone setting fire to the handwritten pages of an old book.

Painful, full of wounds that may never heal, and to put it simply: quite tragic.

But still: just a book.

That maybe, no one can read anyway.

And Wilbur wouldn't trade that for anything else.

He watches Fundy unpack his presents, eyes wide open. How he shows Ranboo's his new toys and clothes, putting on a new, black hat from Phil; as he asks for more cake.

With a smile, he watches Fundy and Ranboo run around the yard, holding Tommy in his arms.

“I think he liked it,” Techno says, glancing over his shoulder, as Fundy waves his foam sword in the air once again. “I didn't know what to buy. I don't know much about kids...”

And then Tommy smiles as he laughs, and holds out his arms towards him.

A few hours later, when, after a *very* tearful and *very* tragic goodbye between Ranboo and Fundy, Niki finally disappears behind the gate, holding her brother's hand, she still yells:

“See you soon, Techno!”

Wilbur looks at him questioningly, and the man looks away. The tips of his ears turn slightly red.

“We go to the same hairdresser.”

As it turns out, convincing Fundy to go to bed proves to be even more difficult, than trying to separate him from Ranboo.

“I don't want to!” He crosses his arms over his chest, puffing up his cheeks. “It's my birthday!”

“Yes, and we've already extended your bedtime. Come on, look, Tommy's asleep too.”

Fundy just shakes his head.

“I'm not tired!”

And maybe Wilbur would have been more likely to believe it, if he didn't have to stop halfway through the sentence to yawn.

“Do as you want.” Phil gets up from the couch, stretching a bit. “I'm going to bed.” He looks exhausted, a bit paler than usual. But he still smiles the same way.

Techno watches him go.

“Do you need help?” He asks

Phil turns, to look at him with deep resentment. And in this, with his furrowed brows and his chin held high, he seems strangely younger again.

“I'll be fine.”

And he goes up the stairs, limping on one leg.

With one less person in the room, and three assurances that he would get some extra cake tomorrow, Fundy finally gets dragged into his bedroom. Not without whining and deliberately slow walk, but still.

And as Wilbur pulls back the sheets on his bed, the boy suddenly remembers something, as he

rushes over to the desk.

“For you!” He says, shoving the piece of paper he pulled from the drawer into his hands

If it was someone else, like maybe Techno, still standing in the door, maybe he would have a bit of trouble interpreting this specific drawing.

With understanding of what exactly the shapeless brown spot is supposed to represent, why the sun is blue for some reason.

Maybe he would have a problem deciphering the letters at the top, looking more like hieroglyphs.

Or why there's something on the other side of the page, that with the use of a lot of imagination, you could call it a fox.

But it's Wilbur, who feels his chest tighten, as he reads.

'FOR DAD'.

Fundy looks at him, smiling.

“Happy birthday!”

And really, all Wilbur can do, is to pull him close.

His little, big boy, who just turned six. His son, whose birth was the best day of his life. Fundy, who had always been that one force, the one exception, that pushed him forward.

Wilbur Soot turns twenty-six today.

And for the last six or more years, his life has been an unstable sand castle, a constantly burning book, and an attempt to ignore the smoke, as it choked him slowly.

But maybe, those moments, when he could just hold his baby, made it all worth it.

“Thank you.”

Wilbur closes the door behind them, discreetly wiping his eyes with his sleeve. The drawing, carefully folded, weighs heavily in his pocket.

Techno, clearly still a bit confused, shifts awkwardly from foot to foot. But before Wilbur is able to say anything, he says: “You didn't say it's your birthday.”

Wilbur shrugs slowly.

“I don't really celebrate it.”

Techno's rubbing the back of his neck with his hand, and when Wilbur finally wants to wish him a good night, he looks at him again.

“Do you want to grab a drink? I mean, from home. We have, uhm, *things*. Do you want a drink? That's what I mean.” He clears his throat, looking away quickly.

At first, Wilbur wants to say no, more from habit than anything else, but when he looks at Techno, there is no forced politeness on his face.

And maybe it's because of the low light, or maybe because he's already a bit tired after the whole day, but Techno seems much... Nicer, than usual.

Like he actually wants to do something with Wilbur, not because he feels it's appropriate or as a loosely thrown suggestion, but simply.

Because he wants to.

“Okay,” he says finally. “Just, no whiskey.”

One and a half hours later, Wilbur is unsure of a few things.

He's not sure how much exactly he drank, because after the first glass, their stiff conversation suddenly relaxed noticeably, and then the wine suddenly began to pour much faster.

He's not sure what exactly amused him so much, but suddenly everything that comes out of Techno's mouth seems to be the funniest thing he has ever heard.

He's not sure where that strange, awkward barrier between him and Techno has disappeared to, the one that has always accompanied their previous interactions.

All he knows, is that with each sip, a bitter aftertaste on his tongue and that pleasant, dizzying warmth spreading all over his body, Techno suddenly, slowly, starts to feel a little less...
Intimidating.

He's still a lot taller than him, at least twice as wide, and his nose wrinkles strangely over the pale, long scar.

But when he laughs with him, pouring him another glass, shushing each other like kids on a sleepover, Wilbur notices something familiar about him, a little more clearly.

Ironic, given that familiar dullness, that usually seems to obscure his mind like a fog.

“I'm just saying,” Techno says, pausing to finish off the last bit of wine from his glass. “That it doesn't make sense to me. Why do I have to go to work all my life, to have enough money to buy water, if when die later, my family can't afford a coffin anyway? Do you know how expensive coffins are nowadays?”

Wilbur nods, feeling everything around him spin a bit.

“Oh, I know. My mom's dead.”

Techno nods.

“Oh yeah. They do that.”

Though normally mentioning his mother made him feel that familiar tightness in his throat, and maybe, normally it's still too fresh of a wound, at this moment it's more of an amusing anecdote, than anything else.

He laughs, then chokes on his wine, as Techno puts his hand over his face, trying to hide his smile.

As if they were having an exceptionally ordinary conversation about very cheerful topics.

His mother's death might not have been particularly amusing or funny, and if that intangible barrier still existed between them, perhaps he wouldn't even dare to say it out loud.

But now there are empty bottles of wine between them, and Wilbur has a lot to say.

“But you didn't pay for her funeral, did you?” Techno notes. “Phil was paying.:

“You think I can afford it? I'm unemployed.” He smiles, twirling an empty glass in his hand. “As like, you know, a form of rebellion. Against the system.”

“Is it?” Techno leans forward slightly in the chair.

“Of course. I'm an *artist*, did you know? Musician.”

Techno bursts out laughing before covering his mouth with his hand, silencing himself.

“An artist? That's like, another word for '*unemployed*,'” he says, seemingly amused by his own joke. “Tho, you look like that type. No offense.”

He leans back in his chair, putting his hands in his pockets.

“Yeah, I know” Wilbur reaches to pour himself more wine.

“Well, then. Come on, Music Boy. Sing something for me.” He smiles, like he's challenging him, but Wilbur just shakes his head, his mouth full.

“Oh no, I don't do that anymore.” He shallows, the bitter taste sticking to his tongue.

Techno tilts his head.

“You know, that might be the reason you're unemployed.”

Wilbur laughs.

“Yes, yes.” he shrugs, smiling a little sheepishly. “Well, and maybe because I never went to college.”

Techno's eyes open a little wider, as if this information was not only surprising, but also even vaguely positive.

“And I got kicked out. See how much we have in common?”

“Why did they kick you out?”

Techno waves his hand, almost casually.

“Because I stopped showing up in class.” He pours himself some more wine into his glass. “And then I hit the professor.”

Wilbur closes his eyes for a moment, shaking his head.

“And why did you hit him?”

“Because he wanted to kick me out for not showing up in class.”

“Ah. Yeah, obviously.”

As they finish the next bottle, the clock on the wall hits nearly one in the morning, and Wilbur slowly feels the world around him start to blur a bit more.

He slaps his hand on his forehead, as if trying to stop it, as suddenly the chair he's sitting on seems to start spinning.

“And that's what I am talking about. There will never be any ethical society under anyone's authority. And certainly not under *their* authority.” Techno adds, then looks at him, raising his brows a bit. “You good?”

“I wanted to be president,” Wilbur says suddenly, resting his face in his hands.

Techno tilts his head a bit.

Hand his face is red, including the tip of his nose, his eyesight a little hazy, and his hair a mess, a few strands falling out from the previous proper up do. Wilbur isn't very comforted by the thought, that he probably looks very similar.

“When I was little. That's what I wanted to be.”

His elbows slide across the table, until he rests his cheek on his arm.

“Oh? I'll remember that when we murder the bourgeoisie in a revolution,” Techno says, and Wilbur laughs.

“And I'm... *Fucking drunk.*”

Techno nods slowly.

He opens his mouth as if to add something, then closes it. His gaze shifts to the side, looking outside the window, and for a moment he stares at it without saying a word.

“We can go to the beach.” He suddenly suggests. “Sober up a little.”

It's a very stupid plan, perhaps even dangerous. Because neither he nor Techno look capable of going anywhere at the moment, with heavy heads and blurry eyesight.

But Wilbur is drunk, so all he responds is:

“Fuck. Sure. Why not?”

There are many reasons as to *'why not'*, but none of them have the desire or the intention to ponder over them as they stand up from their seats, almost stumbling over their own feet on the way out.

On the porch, Techno holds out his arm.

“You're gonna fall over,” he says, almost tripping on the small stairs.

It's the first time he's, literally and figuratively, close to Techno.

Leaning on his shoulder, stumbling over the uneven ground, bursting out laughing every now and then for no apparent reason, he clings a little tighter to his denim jacket.

And maybe it's a bit strange.

How simple it seems.

How easy it's for him to lean against the same man, who only a few hours ago he was so wary of.

Maybe he shouldn't feel so comfortable around him, maybe there's something worrying about how quickly he clung to anyone in moments like these.

Wilbur is too drunk to think about that.

“Who fucking built these roads like that?” He asks, as if Techno would actually be able to give him a location for the architect that created this sand mixed with the dirt.

“Don't complain,” He replies instead. “And watch your feet, or-”

And he pauses, to keep Wilbur from ending up on his knees in the grass.

“You're stupid,” Techno says, but the smile still visible on his face ruins the illusion a bit.

“Not at all.” Wilbur lets him pull him into a more of a vertical position. “I'm pretty and you like me.”

Techno shakes his head.

“Pretty fucking annoying, that's for sure.”

The beach is almost empty, except for one boat leaning against the shore, and a few seagulls, drifting in the distance.

Despite the alcohol in his veins, Wilbur still shivers, as he wraps his sweatshirt sleeves tighter around himself. The wind ruffles his hair.

“Cold as always.” Techno remarks very accurately, pulling the heavy boots off his feet and casually throwing them on the sand.

Wilbur struggles to keep his balance, eventually leaning against Techno while taking off his old shoes.

And then he almost falls over again, when his support rock decides to move suddenly, making a few steps towards the sea.

“Come on,” he turns, waving his hand at him.

The water is icy cold and Wilbur recoils almost instantly. Techno, clearly less concerned about it, walks ankle-deep in it.

“What, you actually want to swim?” Wilbur asks, somewhat joking, but Techno shrugs.

“You'll sober up faster.”

If he wasn't drunk, his answer would probably be: *'Are you fucking crazy?'*, or something with about the same meaning.

But if he wasn't drunk, he wouldn't have been on the beach at one in the morning in the first place.

So all he responds is:

“I don't have a swimsuit-”

And before he can finish, Techno is already taking off his shirt, throwing it onto the sand.

Wilbur feels like he's losing his mind.

And maybe, for anyone looking at this situation from the shore, how he's waist-deep in the icy water, in his very wet and cold shorts, in the middle of the night, he would seem not only extremely stupid, but also insane.

For Wilbur, it's just hilarious.

He tilts his head back, laughing.

And there are more stars in the sky, than he has ever seen in the city.

“Cold, huh?” Techno asks, running his fingers through his tangled, damp hair

“Like a bitch.”

Wilbur turns to the boat on the shore, taking a step towards it, but Techno stops him.

“Oh, no, we're not going there. A seal bit me there.”

Wilbur freezes. Then he looks back at him, eyes wide.

“Wait, you really got bitten by a seal?”

“You didn't know?” He wrinkles his nose, as if to show the way the skin fits around the scar.

“I don't know, I thought Phil was just joking...” He says hesitantly, feeling extremely thrown off, and maybe a bit more sober. “How did that even happen, what the fuck did you do?”

“I got bitten.”

“No. You're fucking with me.”

Techno smirks, nudging him lightly on the shoulder.

“Maybe a little.”

Wilbur rolls his eyes, mumbling under his breath, and Techno laughs softly.

The cold water, rhythmically bumping against his legs, seems to clear his mind a bit, or at least to free him from that drunken fog. He takes a step further, for a moment, but walks back immediately.

“Come on.” Techno nods at the water.

Wilbur winces a bit, something cold running down his neck.

“Maybe another time.”

Techno stares at him, his face straight for a moment.

And then, without any warning, he moves his hand, hitting it against the water.

Wilbur quickly turns his face, holding up his arms, but the cold still touches the side of his head, soaking his hair, his arm.

Techno bursts out laughing, maybe because of his general reaction or maybe because of the extremely embarrassing squeal he made, and Wilbur frowns.

“Oh, you *fucker*-”

In response, Techno just splashes him a second time.

And maybe it's a bit silly.

Maybe they are two adult men in a state of 'not very sober', running around the shallow water, laughing and splashing like little kids.

But for some reason, there's a strange, warm feeling behind it.

Something between recognizing and longing for something he never had.

For something that may have been written out for another Wilbur, in a different reality. To another Wilbur who knew these beaches, this ocean, how he's resting all his weight on Techno's back, trying to dunk him under the water, like a little boy.

Maybe.

“You still think I'm a dick?” Techno asks, and Wilbur feels his face turn a bit hotter.

“Yes. Very much,” he mumbles, but then his face softens, as he looks at Techno.

He doesn't know him.

Not really, although they share the same family tree.

But at this moment, he seems so strangely close, something that Wilbur's heart secretly and silently hopes for.

It's still hard to call him family. Not yet, although the mere thought of it may not hurt him as much as it used to.

But Wilbur would call him a friend.

And maybe, if the water hadn't washed out some of the alcohol out of his blood already, he would have said it aloud.

“You know,” he says instead. “When I met you, I was a little afraid of you.”

Techno raises his eyebrows.

“Why?”

Wilbur shrugs, smiling.

“I don't know.”

And indeed. He doesn't.

They come home near three in the morning, slightly more sober, but still in a bit too good of a mood.

Definitely way too good for Phil, who's waiting for them in the living room, arms crossed in the armchair.

He looks angry, and maybe Wilbur would be concerned, if he still wasn't holding onto Techno's wet jacket.

“Do you realize,” he gets up from his seat, walking towards them, “how worried I was?”

Though he clearly tries to seem mad, his face softens for a moment as he looks at Techno, brushing some wet hair from his face.

And then at Wilbur, in soaked shorts. For a second it looks like he's trying to reach out to him as well, but at the last moment, he stops.

And then his eyes feel sharp again.

“I thought, I didn't know... Tommy started crying, and you were gone and of course neither of you had a phone, because of course, why would you, and... Ugh.” He closes his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. “Where the fuck were you?”

Wilbur looks at Techno, who's currently biting his lip, trying to hide how the corners of his mouth tremble slightly.

“Looking for seals.”

And at that they both burst out laughing, bending down, resting their hands on their knees. Phil looks from one to the other, then runs his hand over his face.

“I'm... Sorry...” Is all Wilbur can say between one giggle and another, while Techno rests a hand on his shoulder.

“I can't stand it, a bunch of drunks... Go to your rooms!” Phil gestures toward the stairs with his hand. “And I don't want to hear you any more today.”

“I'm not a kid!” Techno says.

And so they go up the stairs, still giggling, and when they finally part in the hallway, Techno pats him on the back.

That night, going to bed with a heavy head and dry mouth, Wilbur remembers the last time he felt this intoxicating warmth.

When he had neither Techno, nor the ocean, nor so many stars in the sky with him.

When he was alone, in his old, crappy apartment, when Tommy still seemed strangely out of place in his arms, that tightness in his throat.

When his thoughts on that one evening were filled with nothing but *her*, her smile, her eyes, always finding her way back to his mind.

When he remembered all his mother's bitter words for the first time in so long; her eyes were so cold.

But dead women tell no tales, and Wilbur doesn't either.

Not tonight.

Because maybe no amount of alcohol can turn some stories into funny anecdotes.

Maybe some memories are just too bitter to remember, like cheap whiskey on his tongue.

And he falls asleep, and the sea on the horizon glistens in the moonlight.

Chapter End Notes

Going back to school in 2 days. I'll TRY to keep up the weekly uploads, but you know :')

Tumblr user nyxrsh, if you're reading this - you're very pog, keep up the good work!!

Knowing Me, Knowing You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wilbur feels, like life in this strange, old house is slowly returning to its old rhythm.

Maybe slightly changed, now making room not only for him, but for two more kids, but both Phil and Techno seem to fall back into their old routine.

Like during Easter, when one of the family members is clearly overusing their stay, and while telling them to get the fuck out would be by far the most effective and simple way, somehow no one has enough courage to go about it, and instead simply pretending that the intruder does not exist (sometimes including: deliberately placing one less plate on the table).

Except that, Wilbur, surprisingly, doesn't feel any less welcome.

Yes, maybe Phil disappears from home more and more often, maybe he locks himself up in his office down the hall, sometimes for hours.

But in the end, he always spends these few moments with him, having dinner together or just sitting at the foot of his bed in the evening.

He always listens patiently to all of Fundy's imaginary stories, gently brushing his hair from his forehead.

He always talks to Tommy in the same calm, gentle way, with that shine of something soft and warm in his eyes.

Although his life seems to be returning to the way it was before, Phil definitely seems ready to make room for him as well.

It's similar with Techno.

Only much more worrisome.

Wilbur remembers Phil's words sometimes, the way he talked about Techno, and he has to agree with him. Because saying that he *'disappears for entire days, fuck knows where'* was honestly an understatement.

While it's hard to say Techno is 'never home', there are still *those* days.

When he leaves in the morning, only to come back late in the evening or in the middle of the night, going straight to his bedroom, or occasionally just throwing himself on the couch and passing out on the spot.

Which, in fact, would not be *that* alarming.

What is alarming, are those few days, when he comes back with visible bruises, on his face, hands, a swollen nose and messy hair.

Phil always looks at him then, with such unbearable concern and worry, that Wilbur wondered how Techno's heart hasn't yet broken from the guilt.

And maybe, almost two weeks ago, Wilbur wouldn't care.

It wouldn't be his business, and if Techno wants to take part in a some very obviously shady stuff, he has no reason to stop him.

Maybe he would just shrug it off.

Two weeks ago.

But not now.

Because since his birthday, something has changed in the way he looks at Techno.

Maybe it was because it finally dawned on him, that he was acting a bit childish, holding tight to the image he had created in his head when they first met, without giving him any chance to correct it.

Or maybe there are just moments that bring people closer together, irreversibly, especially those sprinkled with a large amount of alcohol.

And swimming in the sea in the middle of the night, is definitely one of those moments.

This imaginary wall, the line marking their gap, distance, seemed to disappear for good. And with no obstacles in the way, it was much easier for Wilbur to just see *Techno*.

The way he was still ruffling Fundy's hair a bit awkwardly, the way he touched him gently, as if afraid of hurting him with any wrong move.

How he always tried to do little things for Phil, how he held out his arm for him, always slowing down his pace.

How he looked at Tommy, with such a strange softness, but still backing up a bit, as the baby stretched out tiny his hands towards him.

And it is this picture of Techno, still a bit awkward, always seeming out of place, but looking at him with a smile at times, laughing at his jokes, resting a hand on his shoulder, that makes Wilbur unable to hold back that familiar squeeze in his throat.

When he looks at the bruises on his hands when he rolls up his sleeves.

Wilbur didn't plan to wait for him.

Not at all.

Phil himself seemed to have given up on it a long time ago, just glancing at his watch and mumbling a short *'he'll be back soon'*, though it sounds a bit, like he's trying to reassure himself more than Wilbur. And eventually he goes back upstairs, wishing him a good night.

And Wilbur is not waiting for Techno at all.

It just so happens that the show on the TV is especially interesting, and the kids are still sleeping through the night, so he has nothing to worry about, really. And maybe he has to wake himself up a few times, but that's only because he doesn't want to miss the next episode.

That's the only reason.

And he *doesn't* jump up, hearing the key twist in the front door. He doesn't run out to the hallway, almost stumbling over his own feet.

Not at all.

Techno looks, for lack of a better word, like shit. Hair completely disheveled, spilling over his shoulders. On his jaw, there's a clear outline of a new, forming bruise.

Which, however, isn't that much out of the norm, so Wilbur the tension slowly disappears from his shoulders.

“You're up?” Techno bend down, to kick off his shoes

Wilbur nods his head.

“Couldn't really sleep.”

It's not even a complete lie.

Wilbur isn't really sure what to make of it.

Techno straightens up and Wilbur just looks at him for a moment, trying to collect himself more.

“Listen,” he breathes out finally. “I know it's none of my business. Or anything. But...”

He doesn't actually ask the question.

And apparently, he doesn't have to. Because Techno looks at him right away, at first with obvious frustration, but then his face softens a bit.

He's silent for a moment, staring somewhere to the side, his eyebrows furrowed the same way Phil's often are. As if he's not sure what answer to give, if any.

And if that night, in that hallway, cluttered with coats and boots, Techno saw *him* too, through the gap left from that wall between them, Wilbur would never know for sure.

Because at the same time that Techno opens his mouth, suddenly there's a loud cry, coming from upstairs.

“*Fuck.*” Wilbur instantly turns, hurrying up the stairs.

When he enters the room, he immediately kneels by the cradle, picking up the baby and rocking him slightly in his arms.

“Hey, hey. It's okay.”

He rests Tommy on his shoulder as he stands up and walks over to the window.

The first times he held Tommy in his arms were clumsy. Panicked, awkward.

Wilbur had no idea what he was actually doing.

Now, though, Tommy feels warm and familiar to him, as he holds him close, resting his chin on his fair hair.

And softly, first just humming, then adding words, he sings a familiar lullaby, listening to the

baby's cry slowly fade away.

He used to hold Fundy like that.

In a much smaller apartment and perhaps with a slightly heavier heart. And even though so much has changed since then, the melody still remained the same.

And maybe there's something reassuring about it.

Safe.

Techno steps behind him, as he run up the stairs barely registered somewhere in the back of his mind, not paying much attention to them. So when he turns towards the door, he suddenly shivers, feeling his heart beat a little faster.

“Oh, fuck. You scared me.”

Techno's shoulder is resting on the door frame, and he's looking at Tommy. But he finally shifts his gaze to Wilbur, a little awkwardly rubbing his arm with his hand.

“Sorry. I didn't know... You really do have a nice voice, Music Boy.” He finally says, clearly a bit embarrassed

“Oh. Uhm, thanks.”

They're quiet for a moment; a strange expression appears on Techno's face. He puts his hand in the pocket of his jacket.

“I, uhm...” He looks visibly embarrassed, as he shifts from foot to foot. Wilbur frowns, but before he can say anything, Techno adds: “I have something for him.”

He nods at Tommy.

Wilbur glances from him to Techno, and then back to his brother, before finally answering:

“Oh? That's nice of you.”

Techno looks like he wants to add something, but instead he just comes closer to Wilbur.

“Uhm. Here.”

A tiny, stuffed toy, smaller than his hand, lands on Wilbur's open palm. And for a moment, he just stares at the plush cow, it's dark button eyes, and feels himself smiling involuntarily.

Wilbur shifts Tommy in his arms, grasping the toy between his fingers, hanging it in front the boy's face.

“Hey, look what I have.”

Tommy stares at it with large, bright eyes for a moment, then holds out one hand.

And, like any self-respecting child, immediately checks whether or not the new gift is edible.

Wilbur laughs, holing his brother tight in his arms.

“I think he likes it,” he says.

Techno, just looks at Tommy with an unreadable face. But also with strange warmth in his eyes, he nervously puts one hand in the pocket of his pants; bites his lip for a moment.

And in that moment, Wilbur just rolls his eyes.

“Do you want to hold him?” he asks, and Techno shivers, staring at him with wide eyes. “Just asking.”

He shrugs.

And for a second, Techno looks like he wants to decline. But he presses his lips together, not moving away.

It's a good sign, Wilbur thinks.

“I...” He says finally, soft, in a quiet voice. “I don't want to hurt him.”

And Wilbur feels something inside him tighten, even if only for a moment.

He looks at Techno, who's always so gentle with Fundy, who lets him grab his hand when they cross the road, who always says he's not good with children.

And he sees Techno, and that old divide between them doesn't exist.

Without saying a word, he turns Tommy in his arms, shifting them towards Techno.

Who, in a very clear, sudden panic, picks him awkwardly.

Tommy stares at him with big eyes, one hand grasping the toy, the other gripping the fabric of Techno's shirt.

He reaches one of them higher.

Techno leans down a bit, letting the boy touch his long hair, his cheek.

And he smiles.

“Hi, Tommy.”

And if Wilbur feels that familiar warmth, somewhere in his chest, he doesn't say anything about it.

He doesn't think he has to.

A scream wakes him up at night.

He lived with a child (now, even with two of them) for the past six years, and he's used to it. Screams, cries, and basically any other sound that kids are capable of making. He's used to it, and yet.

Something is *wrong*.

He feels it, as he sits up on his bed, squinting in the dark. It still plays in his head, somewhere in

the back of his mind, like a broken record.

Because it wasn't the cry of a child waking up from a nightmare at night, a child accidentally stumbling over a rug on the way to the bathroom, or a hungry baby.

He hears it again, he's not sure if it's real, or just a faint memory repeating in his mind.

It sounds like fear.

Something is *very wrong*.

He puts his feet to the floor, Tommy in his cradle shifts and turns, clearly awake as well.

Wilbur resists the urge to pick his brother up, pull him close, safely. Because at that moment the light in the hallway suddenly turns on, spilling through the crack under his door.

Heavy, quick steps, creaking door, muffled voice.

Wilbur stands up, shooting one last glance towards Tommy, then hurries out of the room.

The door at the end of the hallway is open. Which, perhaps in different circumstances, would even seem encouraging. Like a silent invitation to come inside.

Now, however, the door left open in a house full of people, with the quiet whispers, seems to be nothing more than a bad omen.

Especially if it leads to Phil's room.

Wilbur quickly collects himself, reaching it in a few quick steps and peering inside.

Phil's sitting on his bed, legs still covered with his sheets.

And while he does seem to be relatively '*safe*', he looks anything, but '*sound*'.

His face is sweaty, eyes absent, distant almost. His chest is rising and falling quickly. His jaw is clenched to the point, where his entire face seems tense.

It takes a moment for Wilbur to spot the tears, streaming down his cheeks.

He doesn't look '*okay*'.

But still, all the darkest scenarios he could think of in that last moment, are falling down over him in cold sweat.

Techno's there.

Sitting on the bed, holding Phil's wrists down, tightly in his hands. He leans forward a little. "Hey, *dad*. It's okay, nothing's happening."

Phil closes his eyes for a moment, wrinkling his nose as if trying hard to focus on something. And when he looks back at his son, there's something warm and new in his eyes.

Something like *recognition*.

"Tech." He breathes, his tense arms visibly relaxing, falling down.

“Yeah. Just me.”

Techno leans in closer, resting their foreheads together.

Phil closes his eyes again, but his breathing slows down noticeably, face relaxes. He adjusts his hands, so that he can squeeze Techno's palms in his.

“Do you want yours...” he starts softly, but Phil immediately shakes his head.

“No. No, it's okay. I just-” And suddenly, as if guided by some gut feeling, he looks to the side, only now noticing Wilbur. “O-oh.” He stutters a bit, flustered. “Did I wake you up?”

Phil rubs his face quickly with his hand, straightening suddenly, brushing his hair back.

“Sorry,” he adds, smiling apologetically.

And under that familiar smile, Wilbur spots a trace of sheer embarrassment.

And maybe, it was like that before. Maybe he just never noticed.

Hiding something more, some deeper regret and sorrow, that Wilbur hadn't even thought of looking for.

“Don't apologize,” Techno says stiffly, just as Wilbur replies: 'it's okay'.

Techno looks at him, frowning slightly. Staring at him, he looks for something more than just nervousness and a bit of confusion.

Whatever it is, he doesn't find it. His face softens.

But that might have more to do with the fact, that he turns back to Phil. Who, though clearly calmer, is still holding his hands tightly.

“What happened? Everything's okay?” Wilbur finally asks.

He realizes that his nails are digging into his skin.

He relaxes his fingers with difficulty.

“Yes, yes.” Phil quickly assures. “Everything's all right. Just...”

He pauses for a moment, as if considering something carefully. Techno leans down, picking up a pillow from the floor, that somehow found its way to the ground.

“I had a bad dream,” he finally says and laughs, a bit bitterly. “I know, it's stupid-”

“It's not stupid.” Techno looks at him.

They stare at each other for a moment, frowning, in a uniquely similar way.

And for a moment, Wilbur feels, like there's a completely different conversation happening in the room. One that, he's definitely not a part of, reserved only for Phil and his son.

One that they had thousands of times before, before he even showed up.

Eventually, Phil just rolls his eyes.

“Anyway, sorry if I scared you.”

Wilbur shifts nervously on his feet.

“That's nothing. I'm glad you're... Okay.”

Phil smiles at him. And maybe, there's nothing deeper behind it this time.

Wilbur can't help that his heart beats a little faster, when they finally leave Phil's room.

Or rather: are not so kindly ask to leave. Despite Techno's reassurances and stubbornness, Phil finally sends them both back to their beds (but he lets go of his hands with a slight hesitation).

But watching Techno close the door behind them, Wilbur feels that familiar taste of panic, building somewhere in the back of his mind. Thoughts flowing a little too fast, his hands tremble a little too much, and though he isn't sure why, his throat tightens.

Techno looks at him.

“You good?” He asks.

Wilbur shrugs.

“I'll manage.”

And maybe, he would.

Maybe after an hour of staring at the wall, listening to the sound of his own blood in his ears, he would finally be able to calm his beating heart.

Maybe if he kept telling himself long enough that nothing was happening, it would eventually start to feel like it.

Maybe after checking on Fundy in his room, holding Tommy in your arms, it would be okay.

Techno doesn't seem very convinced by his words.

“Will you be able to sleep?”

Wilbur opens his mouth but says nothing for a moment.

Apparently, this moment of hesitation is enough, because Techno sighs slightly.

And perhaps for the first time in his life, someone looks at him and asks:

“Do you want me to stay with you?”

Wilbur doesn't answer. Partially because of the pure shock, partially because Techno's already halfway to another room, down the hall.

And maybe, it's a bit silly. How absurdly big such a simple gesture seems to him.

He cannot remember the last time someone looked at him with warmth, the last time someone held his hands so tight, steadily, when someone just was *there*.

And even that little bit of it, that Phil sometimes shares with him, and now, apparently, Techno too, feels almost overwhelming.

Mostly though: *confusing*.

Techno turns to face him, raising an eyebrow.

“Are you coming or not?”

Techno's room, is actually the complete opposite of what he expected.

Which is maybe a bit stupid, because he's not even sure what exactly he expected.

In addition to the double bed, there's also a desk, strategically placed under the window, overlooking the dark forest. A nightstand with a lamp, lighting up the room, and a huge bookcase, filled to the brim.

Some of the books are next to the bed, laying in a small pile. And one, abandoned among the tangled sheets.

Wilbur realizes, that Techno probably hasn't slept at all this night.

The whole room, like the rest of the house (only in contrast to Wilbur's bedroom), seems almost cozy; inhabited.

Clothes lying on the floor, and old posters on the walls, give it a distinct character. Of someone busy and maybe a bit too overwhelmed with work, whatever it was supposed to be.

There's a picture on the desk, of someone Wilbur already recognizes as young Techno, and another boy with dirty blond hair and button nose.

He closes the door behind him, just standing awkwardly for a moment. Techno looks in his direction, raising an eyebrow.

“Sit down.” He nods towards his bed, leaning against his desk. “I don't bite.”

Wilbur sincerely hopes he's telling the truth.

He sits down, on the crumpled sheets, resting his hands on his knees to stop them from trembling so much.

Techno looks at him silently for a moment, as if considering something.

“Does this happen often?”

Wilbur frowns, a bit taken aback.

“What?”

“Well...” Techno makes a weird gesture. “*This*. Look at you, you're shaking all over.”

Wilbur immediately straightens up, just to emphasize how much he is not shaking all over.

“I'm not shaking,” he says. “It's okay. I just get... Emotional. Sometimes. That's it.”

It reminds him of a slightly different conversation he had with another resident of this house, who also looked at him the way Techno does now.

With disbelief and worry.

And like his father, Techno decides not to push the subject.

There's something else on his face too, that he can't quite read.

Techno's definitely similar to his father, although it took Wilbur months to fully realize it.

In their gestures, expressions, the way they wrinkled their noses, eyebrows, there's a familiarity, that's hard to miss once you noticed it.

Techno looks out the window for a moment, lazily tapping his fingers on the desk, and finally Wilbur collects himself enough to ask:

“But Phil... He's gonna be okay, right?”

Techno snorts, smiling bitterly, as if Wilbur said something amusing, about something very unfunny.

“Depends on how you interpret it,” he replies, not very helpful, and Wilbur frowns.

“Does it happen a lot?”

Techno's silent for a moment, scratching some dirt from underneath his fingernails.

“Not as often as it used to.” He looks at Wilbur again. “But I don't know if it will ever stop.”

His voice is calm, but there's something mixed with concern and sadness in it.

“Well, I mean.” He laughs nervously, not minding his own business. “It wasn't just a 'bad dream', was it?”

“It was,” Techno says firmly. “He...”

He pauses for a moment, as if he is wondering how to put something into words properly, or whether to say it at all.

Finally, he looks back at Wilbur, with a calm, but still hard-to-read face.

“Dad fought in The War, did he ever tell you that?”

He didn't.

He definitely didn't.

For a moment, Wilbur just stares at Techno. Dumbfounded.

“O-oh,” he breathes. “No. I didn't know.”

He tries to imagine it. Phil, in his colorful suits and shirts, hats and that slightly haunting crow-cane - on the battlefield.

It feels ridiculous. It doesn't feel *right*.

But when he really thinks about it for a moment, he thinks of those times when Phil stared out the window, rubbing his scarred shoulders with his hand, how he looked tired and a bit lost.

How sometimes he flinched at sudden noises.

And maybe, all these seemingly meaningless details, suddenly turned into a logical, extremely sad picture.

“For like, a year,” Techno adds, in a completely indifferent, ordinary tone. “And then he fucked up his leg and never went back.”

“Oh. That's...”

Sad? Admirable? Horrible?

He's not sure what word, other than *'heartbreaking'*, could ever describe it accurately.

Phil's nice. He's gentle.

He brushes Techno's hair back, helps Fundy tie his shoes, hold Tommy, like he's the most precious thing. And maybe that's why, the thought that those same hands once held a weapon, make something in him ache.

Because in his mind, no matter what, Phil was always just like that. Laughing at his jokes, taping out the rhythm of his favorite songs on the steering wheel. Open and honest.

Warm.

“But I don't know much,” Techno says again. “It was before I even met him, and he doesn't like to talk about it. He always gets... Sad. You know.”

“So nightmares.”

Techno shrugs, but it's easy to tell just how much he cares after all.

“I don't know. He never went to a doctor with it, and without a diagnosis, all I can do for him are some sleeping meds. Which he doesn't take anyway.”

Here, he winces slightly.

“Why wouldn't he go to the doctor?”

Techno looks at him, with only disappointment.

“Yeah.” He says sharply. “I wonder why. Maybe he just gets a bit *emotional* sometimes.”

Wilbur blushes.

Before he's even able to respond to this very directed attack, Techno waves his hand.

“But let's not talk about those things. Or you'll never fall asleep again.”

“I'm not a kid,” he mumbles.

He's not.

And yet, he's sitting on the Techno bed in the middle of the night, desperately clinging to whatever ounce of comfort he can get.

Maybe he is childish, after all.

“Besides today, how are you doing?” Techno asks, in a slightly different tone.

Wilbur shrugs.

And thinks, it's really the best way to describe it.

Suddenly, a slightly malicious smile appears on Techno's face.

“And what? Have you seen any ghosts yet?”

“Besides the ghosts of my past? No.”

Techno bursts out laughing, Wilbur feels himself smile involuntarily.

Somewhere between all this new information, and the familiar presence of Techno, his arms relaxed, his heart slowed, and suddenly he's breathing quite freely.

Maybe there's just something about Techno himself, something stable and easy to understand.

Grounding in reality.

“But that's not true, is it? The ghost shit?” He asks after a while.

Techno stares at him. And Wilbur suddenly doesn't like his smile anymore.

“Maybe yes. Maybe no.”

“You're fucking with me.”

Techno shrugs.

“I don't know. Maybe you'll find out.”

Wilbur stops smiling.

When an hour later, gazing uncertainly at every dark corner, Wilbur returns to his bedroom, he's relieved to see that Tommy hasn't woken up again that night.

He kneels by the cradle, looking at his brother for a moment.

He is eerily similar to Phil. He knew it before, but now he's really thinking about it.

How there seems to be so much regret and sorrow, hidden behind Phil's gentle face. How after all, despite the scars on his hands and face, his eyes remain warm.

And his arms are open, ready to embrace Wilbur into his life.

About how little he knows about him yet.

Ambiguous time period my beloved

Again, this is no "war" in particular, or any time frame. Is it the 60's? 90's? early 2000's? Neither and all of them <3 Let's just imagine this fictional European country had a war like 30 years before this lol

New ABBA album coming out, I'm so hyped!! Don't Shut Me Down been playing on repeat

The Way Old Friends Do

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next morning, Phil looks much calmer, but definitely exhausted.

He still seems a bit embarrassed, sneaking a few glances at Wilbur, opening his mouth as if to say something, but only looking away.

And with Techno going about his morning, almost casual, Wilbur realizes that apparently - a silent treaty to not bring up the previous night has already been made.

And although he finds himself staring at Phil's scar a little longer, curiosity almost eating him up from the inside, he has a hard time breaking it, when the man still looks so much... *Older*.

'His age', maybe. Which is quite a contrast to his usually still covered with the remains of youth face, hidden behind golden hair.

Now, however, Wilbur sees every wrinkle, gray hair, dark spots under his eyes more clearly. And while his smile is still the same, it clearly puts a bit more effort into it, than usually.

“Puffy will come over,” Techno suddenly announces, not taking his eyes off his phone.

Phil looks at him suddenly, his mug raised halfway to his mouth.

“Oh. Did she say anything or-”

“No,” Techno replies. “I called her.”

Phil frowns, staring at his son with obvious resentment, which might have had some effect, if Techno didn't seem to just not care about it in the slightest.

“Puffy?” Wilbur suddenly stops, midway through his third attempt to get Fundy to eat the tomato on his sandwich. “Niki mentioned her before, I think.”

“Oh, I'm sure she did,” Phil says, with an almost nostalgic smile on his face. “You can say a lot about her.”

The first thing he notices, is the storm of white curls that fall over her broad shoulders, almost like wool. Tangled, messy.

Her eyes are bright, face round, clearly aged, but still feels warm and open. The bracelets, covering almost every inch of her wrists, jingle slightly with every movement; hands clearly rough and scarred, much like Phil's. She's dressed in a very obnoxious shirt and pants, something between a beach party at eight o'clock, and a job interview at nine.

And she obviously appreciates a warm welcome.

“Techno!” She stands on the tips of her toes, reaching her arms towards him.

She's short, maybe even shorter than Phil, and Techno has to bend almost in half to return the hug.

“My second favorite nephew!” She says, stepping back a little, still holding his arms in her hands.

Wilbur's heart skips a beat.

“Second? I was replaced?” Techno clearly tries to sound offended, although there's a hint of a smile on his face.

Puffy just waves her hand.

“You know how it is.”

Suddenly, she turns to Wilbur, who's still standing awkwardly behind Techno; his jaw tight.

“Ah! You must be Wilbur.” And she reaches, shakes his hand.

Her grip is firm, hands rough and dry, and Wilbur swallows, forcing himself to smile.

“Yes. And this one,” he turns, shaking his head at the boy peaking from around the corner. Who yelps quietly, quickly disappearing into the room. “Is my son.”

There are light footsteps, a slight thump from the living room. A soft laugh.

“You're gonna fall over.”

And Phil walks into the hallway, Fundy clinging tightly to his painfully green shirt, hiding behind him, like a human shield.

Something inside Wilbur tightens for a moment, but this time he's pretty sure it's the good kind.

He reaches out to his son. Fundy runs up without hesitation, taking his legs as a new hiding place.

Puffy quickly steps over to Phil, hugging him tightly.

Then she pulls back, with a suddenly stern expression, resting her hands on her hips.

“So this is how it's gonna be, huh? You don't write, you don't call... I wonder if you would even know, if I finally dropped dead.”

Phil rolls his eyes, and Wilbur gets the impression that they've had this exact conversation many times before.

“We talked two days ago.”

“And do you know how many times I could have died in two days?”

“You didn't call either! What if I died, and you were too up your own ass to check first? After all, you keep saying that I'm so *sick* and *weak* and-”

“Okay, okay.” She waves her hand, but there's a slight smile on her face. “Go make me some coffee, old man.”

“I don't know, Captain...” Phil still yells, from, halfway to the kitchen, “I might die on the way. You know, I'm just so *fragile*...”

Though she must be even older than Phil, she still has the same energy of someone, who somehow stopped aging in their forties.

He talks fast, her hands moving around the entire time, golden bracelets catching the sun. She pours so much sugar into her coffee, that Wilbur feels he's getting diabetes just by looking at it.

Fundy stares at her uncertainly, sitting on Wilbur's lap, leaning against his chest.

But apparently: the past few months must have accustomed him a bit to strangers. Although he still doesn't say a word, he relaxes slowly after a while.

Wilbur wants to think it's a good sign.

“Wilbur.” Puffy turns to look at him. “I've heard a lot about you, you know?”

“Oh. Only the positives, I hope.” He sounds hesitant, but she just laughs, waving her hand.

“Don't even worry about that.” She pauses for a moment, looking around the room. “And where's Tommy? Heard a lot about him, too.”

“Still asleep.”

“I can bring him,” Techno suggests immediately, getting up from his seat, looking maybe a bit too eager.

And although Wilbur still feels a bit unsure about it, when Puffy gasps, hand over her mouth at the sight of the baby, he has a hard time remaining very concerned.

“Oh. Hello, sunshine.” She coos, quickly walking over to Techno, who's still holding Tommy a little awkwardly in his arms.

Her voice is suddenly at least a few octaves higher, as she reaches out, to touch the tip of his nose with a finger.

Tommy blinks. His fingers tighten a bit more on Techno's shirt.

“Oh god, you really are so small...”

Tommy suddenly yawns, causing another wave of sheer delight and affection. Not only from Puffy, but also from Techno, who looks down at him with strange tenderness.

Fundy puffs his cheeks, legs swinging in the air, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I can do that too...” He mumbles softly, and Wilbur has a hard time holding back a smile.

So he just holds his cheeks in his hands, kissing the top of his head.

Tommy seems to like Puffy. Or rather: he seems to really like the bracelets on her wrists, turning them with his fingers, eyes bright and curious.

A few months ago, it would have been hard for Wilbur to imagine this.

Letting a complete stranger hold his baby brother in their arms, let alone on their lap. Even if they

spoke in the same, soft voice as Puffy.

But now, with Techno and Phil, it's hard for him to feel in any way, other than simply: *safe*. It's a weird thought.

“I have a nephew his age,” Puffy says, lightly bouncing Tommy on her lap.

“Oh, he would love him.” Phil laughs. “They have quite a lot in common. Like waking us up in the middle of the night...”

“Tubbo likes everyone. Especially the bees.” She presses her lips tighter for a moment, like wincing at a bad memory. “But I would be much happier, if he stopped trying to play with them. It's enough he already almost got stung once.”

“Tubbo?” Wilbur looks at her, raising his eyebrows. “Ah. Right, Niki works for you?”

“You know Niki?”

Puffy grins, putting her hands together near her face.

Golden bracelets jiggle quietly. Tommy holds his hand up, trying to reach them again, with a pout.

“Oh, she's a lovely girl, isn't she? So kind and helpful. Kids like are rare nowadays.” She sighs, leans forward, drinking the rest of her coffee.

She finally puts her hand down.

And Wilbur almost laughs, at how Tommy's eyes light up

“Oh! On the subject of miracle children.” She looks at Techno, smiling slightly. “Dream says hi.”

The change on his face is almost instant.

He winces, rolling his eyes. His nose wrinkles funny around his scar.

“I wouldn't say that's very much *'on the subject'*.”

Wilbur frowns slightly.

Fundy, clearly bored with the whole conversation, leans back more, shifting a little and pressing his cheek against his chest. Wilbur rests his chin on the top of his head.

“Who's Dream?” He asks.

“Nobody,” Techno replies, almost immediately. “An idiot. Don't worry about him.”

“My son,” Puffy rolls her eyes, looking like someone very tired, but already used to whatever this is.

But she almost immediately smiles again, with an almost nostalgic expression on her face.

“He's a sweetheart. Don't listen to Techno,” she adds. “He's doing so great... He started his own business, you know?”

Wilbur, who already has some experience with *'sweethearts'* and *'little sunshines'*, decides to accept this information with a grain of salt.

Just like the fact that Dream is just graduated collage with honors, got engaged, earns enough money to afford an apartment in the city center, and probably saves poor orphans from burning buildings all day, and feeds stray elephants in his spare time

Techno also seems particularly unimpressed by Dream's achievements, just rolling his eyes and clenching his jaw.

“I'll go make you more coffee,” he finally says, and stands up without waiting for an answer.

His nose is scrunched up, fingers tapping against the mug, like he's trying very hard to hold something back.

“I'll go with you,” Wilbur offers immediately. Turning over in his seat, accidentally waking Fundy, who fell asleep, sometime between the story of Dream's first, and second gold medal in running.

They can still hear snippets of conversation, Phil's and Puffy's laughter, but still, the short distance in the kitchen gives them a slight sense of privacy.

“Don't ever ask about Dream,” Techno says in a low voice. “She can talk like that all day.”

Wilbur decides to keep the fact, that Phil is exactly the same, to himself.

And after a moment of silence, staring at the coffee machine warming up, Techno adds in a slightly more irritated tone:

“Graduates with honors my ass. It's only because half of his year failed. He literally only did the bare minimum. And not that, I wrote half of these damn essays for him!”

He mumbles something for a moment, probably more to himself, but Wilbur can't concentrate on it anyway.

The strange feeling that hadn't left him since Puffy stepped inside, still lingers somewhere on the back of his head, like an intrusive thought.

He purses his lips, as he watches Techno rinse one cup under the sink, before finally saying:

“Hey...” He still remembers what Niki said about Phil. And although he has the impression, that this thought is perhaps a bit absurd, the way Puffy said hello to Techno doesn't seem to leave his mind. “Phil never mentioned, that he has... Uhm. A second sister.”

Techno stops. Water drops over his wrist.

Then looks at him, like Wilbur had just announced that two plus two is five. A mixture of surprise, disbelief, and not understanding, of how such a conclusion can even be reached.

“What?”

Wilbur feels his face turn hot.

“Well, it's just...” He rests his hand on the table, nervously tapping out rhythm with his fingers. “She said something about... Never mind. I'm stupid.”

Techno frowns, until a hint of realization washes over his face.

“Oh. You mean...? Oh, no, no.” He laughs softly, as if Wilbur said something hilarious, and not very idiotic. “Puffy's not my real aunt. I just know her since I was little, so. You know.”

Wilbur exhales, and despite his embarrassment, some of the tension disappears from his shoulders.

“Oh. All right.”

Techno looks at him with obvious amusement.

“Relax. We're not hiding any more secret family members from you. I mean,” his face changes for a moment, he frowns, pursing his lips, “I sure hope so.”

Maybe it was all a bit more of a deliberate plan on Techno's part, than Wilbur first thought.

Because with Puffy, Phil seems to regain some of his usual energy. The dark spots on his face are still remarkably visible, but he laughs easier, his smile a little less fake.

With the way they talk to each other, gesticulate, with their inside jokes, it's clear that they have known each other for many years.

And maybe there is something reassuring about it. In the thought, that there are bonds so strong, even in a fragile, human life.

Wilbur seems to forget about that too often.

When Puffy needs to leave, they still just stand in the hallway for a few minutes, clearly neither of them wanting to say goodbye first. But eventually, Puffy checks her watch, frowning and sighing heavily.

“I really have to go,” she says, for the fifth time. “I don't want to overwork Niki.”

And when she finally steps outside, she still turns around. Phil smiles, his eyes gave a bit of a shine to them.

He straightens up, leaning on his cane, touching his fingers to his forehead in a salute. “Ahoy, Captain!”

Puffy rolls her eyes, but laughs along with him, repeating the gesture.

The bracelets on her wrist jingle softly.

Over the next few days, Wilbur reassures himself in the belief, that the weather near the sea just cannot be trusted.

Tho the temperature in the air seems to only be rising over the last week, marking the official, clumsy beginnings of a new summer, the rest of it doesn't seem to agree on that.

“That's how it's gonna be, for most of the summer,” Phil tells them, watching as raindrops hit the kitchen window rhythmically, slowly drip over the glass. “Rain and storms.”

Fundy is definitely the most unhappy about this news. The sun returns a few days later, but

apparently his sandcastle wasn't as waterproof as he hoped it would be.

But in the end, Wilbur still preferred to just suffer through those sand invoked meltdowns. The last time Phil suggested Fundy build something in the garden, near a roof to hide from the rain, Wilbur spend the next hour scrubbing the mud from behind his son's ears.

And maybe, it's because the days seemed to pass lazily under the hot sun, or maybe because he simply lost a track of time, but it's only amid the sounds of rain and chill wind, that Wilbur realizes that almost an entire month has passed.

The month since he got into Phil's sticker-covered, retro-music-filled car, having zero expectations, and still somehow coming out surprised.

And maybe it's a little funny. How easily he fell into a routine.

How quickly he found himself a place at the kitchen table, his favorite mug, his favorite spot on the beach. How he got used to the soft sound of the sea, to the fresh air, or even to this unpredictable, horrible weather.

And if the thought of having to leave it all behind already fills him with melancholy and some deeper, sharp ache - no one needs to know.

Most of the time, it's easy to forget.

When he's trying to convince Fundy to eat anything other than cereal for the third time. When he's standing in the kitchen at three in the morning, waiting for the milk to boil and sleepily bouncing Tommy in his arms.

And especially in those quiet moments when, he just leans back in his chair, listening to the soft drumming of the rain against the glass.

It's easy to just lose himself in those moments, putting the thoughts about the future aside for later, for another sleepless night he'll spend shifting over from side to side on his bed.

And that's where Techno finds him, bringing him back to reality with a slight nudge to his shoulder.

“Mail.” He nods at the pile of envelopes lying on the table. “Father said there might be something for him. I think he's in the office. I need to go now.”

Saying this, he puts the hood over his head, zipping up his jacket, already halfway down the hallway.

“Techno?”

He turns to look at Wilbur, eyebrows raised.

Wilbur isn't quite sure what he wanted to say. He still has a million questions in his head to which, he knows perfectly, he won't any answers.

“Be careful.” He just says. Quiet, unsure.

Techno's face instantly softens, with that strange expression that Wilbur noticed several times before. But never before directed at him.

“Always,” he only replies, before he disappears outside the door.

Among the letter, aside from obvious bills and ads, Wilbur recognizes one. Pale pink envelope, faintly smelling of perfume, with an address written in small, slick handwriting.

He smiles to himself as he stands up.

He had never really been to Phil's office before. But he has seen him disappearing into it many times for long hours, and then coming out, looking only more exhausted.

So now, standing in front of the dark, wooden door, he feels a bit like a child discovering the nooks and crannies of a new home for the first time.

He raises his hand, knocking on the door once, twice.

No answer.

Wilbur frowns, raising his hand again.

Silence.

“Phil?”

And maybe he should have just turned around. Maybe he should have just left the letter at the door, maybe he should keep some decency.

But when once woken up curiosity slowly begins to eat him out from the inside, combined with a slight anxiety, it only takes a moment of hesitation for him to pull the handle.

Phil isn't in his office. The desk chair is pulled away, as if someone had left it only for a moment in a hurry. The coffee cup on the desk is still hot.

The room is dimmed.

The curtains to the only window are tightly closed, and when he finds the image of the house from the backyard in his mind, Wilbur doesn't remember ever seeing them being open.

There's a lot of junk on the desk. Little trinkets, pens, piles of old papers. And a strange, dark sculpture of a raven standing at its very corner. It reminds him very much of the one on Phil's cane, with a similar, elongated beak.

Even apart from it, there are more bizarre ornaments in the room. Vases, snow globes, maps. And one, dark, round sculpture that looks more like an egg than anything else. Everything looking old, fragile, like something the security guard at the museum would tell you to wear white gloves before even looking at it.

At first glance, the room itself seems much smaller than it actually is, mainly because of the tall shelves, almost reaching the ceiling, filled with books of all kinds. Several titles in languages he doesn't even recognize. And between them: photos.

In dark frames, some dusty, others clearly frequently cleaned, taken care of.

A few depicting a little boy, with dark hair and a long scar on his face, very similar to those hanging in the kitchen and living room. Or even the same woman, with long, dark hair and a hat, that he already knows as Kristin.

But most of them, Wilbur sees for the first time.

Like the one, where he hardly recognizes Phil. About thirty years younger, in an oversized helmet, trousers tied with a belt. Right next to the woman with dark curls, in which he finds a resemblance to Puffy. And several other, unknown faces.

Smiling pale to the camera, burned cigarettes in hands, mud on young faces and heavy boots.

There's a particularly thick layer of dust on that frame.

A little below that, already in a much better condition, there's also Phil. A bit older, but with a much more sincere smile. Long hair falls over his shoulders, and in his hand he holds, what Wilbur immediately recognizes as a strange sculpture, (dark at the very top of the bookcase), proudly showing it to the camera.

Wilbur tilts his head slightly, frowning.

And before he can get a closer look, someone rests a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Wilbur shivers violently, standing up straight and turning around.

“Oh! Phil, I just...”

His face is hard to read, but something about the way he draws his brows immediately, makes Wilbur feel guilty. He feels himself turn red, as he squeezes the letter in his hand.

“I was just gonna give you this. I knocked, but you didn't answer. And I thought that, I don't know... That something happened or...”

Phil takes the envelope from him, his face softening momentarily at the sight of the familiar handwriting.

“Thank you,” he looks up again, and although his tone of voice is still calm, Wilbur cannot help feeling, as if he has been told off by an exceptionally kind, and extremely disappointed teacher. “But you shouldn't really be here when I'm around.”

Here for a moment, as if instinctively, he looks around the room.

“There are a lot of things here, that can be easily broken.”

“What does your dad do for a living?” He asks Techno that same evening.

When Techno showed up at the doorstep an hour earlier, Wilbur's first thought was:

'Always' my ass.

Though he didn't seem more injured than usual at first glance, he quickly realized that it was only thanks to the hood, pulled tight over his head, shielding his face. Because as soon as he caught the right angle under the light, he felt something turn around in his stomach.

“They're just bruises,” Techno mumbled, clearly annoyed at first.

“You're bleeding,” Wilbur said, and the man quickly wiped his upper lip with his sleeve.

“There. Happy?”

He wasn't, and Techno could clearly sense it because he rolled his eyes.

“You're acting like my father. I'm fine.”

Wilbur put his hands on his hips, staring at him.

“I miss when you were mean to me,” Techno said five minutes later, sitting on the front porch, with a sack of ice against his swollen face. “At least then you left me alone.”

Though he was looking at Wilbur then, still clearly irritated, the tension slowly faded overtime, and his shoulders relaxed.

So when Wilbur asks him, he has a much softer look on his face.

“Now? He's retired.”

“Yeah. But you know, I mean...”

Here, he looks very meaningfully at the house, that's about six times the size of his apartment.

Techno eyes him carefully for a moment, in this already very familiar way. As if judging in his mind how worthy he is of this information. Wilbur's not sure what this test exactly is and how he succeeds in passing it, but the man eventually looks away, setting the half-dissolved ice bag on the small table.

Part of his face returned to a slightly more normal, less purple color.

“I don't know,” he looks at Wilbur, strands of pink hair fall over his face. “Not really.”

Wilbur frowns.

The chairs they sit on are still a bit cold, the grass in the yard almost glistens in the moonlight.

“When I was little, he would travel a lot. For weeks sometimes. And then he would come back all... Nervous.” He pauses for a moment, frowning, as if trying to recall a specific memory.

Wilbur gives him a moment to gather his thoughts. He nervously grips the hem of his sweater between his fingers.

“And he always got a lot of letters and phone calls, and spoke so many languages, more than I probably even heard of.” He laughs softly.

“So he was working for some... International company?” Wilbur tries uncertainly. Techno wrinkles his nose at that, but then winces in pain

“No, I don't think so.”

“What, you never asked him about it? I mean, it's not like money comes from nowhere.”

“I did. But he always avoided the subject. Especially now.”

They're silent for a moment, staring at the ocean line disappearing behind the trees.

“He taught me a lot of languages when I was younger,” Techno adds after a while, in a more

strangely nostalgic tone. “Like, outside of school. I don't know, I must have been really drawn to it. And I remember, when I wanted to learn Spanish, he just said...”

He pauses again for a moment, pressing his lips tightly together.

“That I can't. Because he doesn't want me to know, what's he talking about on the phone.”

And suddenly, a lot of things made sense. Like the bizarre decor of his office, or some jokes that seemed funny only to him.

Logically, he should have panicked. Even just a little.

Tho it all sounds bizarre, apparently beneath those scraps of childhood memories hid a deeper, slightly darker story, forever covered by time. And the only remains of it will stay and die in that old, ivy-covered house by the sea.

All he can say is:

“Oh.”

Because no matter how deeply he thought about it, how strongly he recalled the photos in his office, the image of Phil in his mind remained the same.

And he's still the same Phil, holding Tommy in his arms, letting him play with his earrings. The same Phil who holds Fundy's hand when they crossed the street. Phil, who always looked at his son with such unimaginable tenderness.

Phil, who made a place for him in his life, expecting nothing in return.

Only maybe now, behind his back, there's a little more weight. Darkness, that he will take to the grave, looming over like heavy wings.

“I know.” Techno laughs, but then suddenly looks at him sharply. “Just keep quiet about that. Got it?”

And if Wilbur had ever really planned something, the sight of Techno clenching his hand on the back of the chair, would very effectively discourage him from doing so.

“I'm not a snitch,” he just says, Techno's face softening instantly.

“Yeah, I hope so.” He says sharply, but a hint of a smile appears on his face.

Chapter End Notes

So it's never specified, but Phil basically used to just smuggle shit abroad during, and a bit after The War. Like artifacts and expensive (mostly stolen stuff). He wasn't like, in the mafia lol

Puffy and Phil as war buddies is an underrated dynamic, honestly

If It Wasn't For The Nights

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

And somehow, it becomes part of their routine.

Maybe not necessarily discussions about Phil's potentially criminal past. But those lazy evenings on the front porch.

A bit uncertain at first, clumsy. When both of them were still testing their boundaries, testing the ground beneath their feet. When they still felt the need to find an excuse, just so the other person wouldn't realize that 'I like your company' was the true, honest reason.

It became easier over time.

And it's easy to sit in the chair next to him, listen to the sounds of the sea, skin drowning in the colors of the setting sun.

It's easy to poke Techno in the shoulder with cold beer, laughing when he opens it with his teeth (which his dentist surely wouldn't find so amusing).

It's easy to start a conversation on absolutely any random topic. Or just sit in silence, when everything seems to slow down for a moment, and just feels *right*.

Wilbur would call Techno a friend.

And in these moments, maybe just for a little bit, he lets himself believe that Techno would do the same.

“Fundy seems to have found a new hobby,” says Techno one evening.

Despite the late hour, it's still unusually hot and steamy outside, and Wilbur feels the T-shirt sticking to his back; sweat on the inside of his knees.

“You don't say.” He murmurs, putting a cold bottle of beer up to his wrist.

Two days earlier, Fundy in a bit of a coincidence, while watching a particularly stupid game show on TV, seemed to rediscover that his father was not only good at geography, but also quite skilled with using maps.

Which, in the eyes of the six-year-old who still doesn't fully understand what all these numbers in the corner of it mean, and how they translate into other numbers, must have look like quite an achievement.

It's not like he has never shared his passions with his child before. He still remembers one of the summers they spend together. When he really wanted to believe that someday, he would show Fundy the whole world.

Fundy himself seemed to just have those momentary obsessions with trivial, and random things every other week. But no matter how exhausting the constant questions were, Wilbur didn't mind it all that much.

Maybe except for that one time, when he asked him why he stopped playing the guitar.

“So, tell me.” Techno smirks. “What is the capital of Mexico?”

Wilbur closes his eyes for a moment, sighing heavily, and Techno laughs.

“The capital of Mexico *is* Mexico,” he says firmly.

It's the correct answer, but also one that Fundy particularly disliked a few hours earlier.

“You can't call the capital after the country!” He waved his spoon, seeming even more upset, when Wilbur just shrugged.

“Maybe,” he repeated, watching Techno hold down the boy's wrist, in the fear of him finally gouging out someone's eye.

“But it's so stupid!” He said, in a tone like he expected not only an official, personal apology from the whole country, but also an immediate change of its name.

Fundy puffed out his cheeks and would have probably crossed his arms over his chest, if one of them wasn't still restrained.

“If I had a country,” he added, “I would call it something cool.” Suddenly, his eyes widened a little and he looked at his father with a broad smile. “Can we have our own country? Please?”

Wilbur looked at Techno, feeling the corner of his mouth twitch slightly.

“Actually. I've always wanted to be a president.”

However, no matter how proud he would be of his child, Wilbur feels like he did nothing else in the last two days, beside reciting names and pointing at a map. And would actually be much happier, if Fundy picked anyone else as the source of all knowledge.

“But it's a good thing, he's very passionate,” he says anyway, glancing at Techno. “It's important at his age.”

Techno looks at him for a moment, raising an eyebrow.

“You talk like a father,” Techno says, shaking his head.

“Maybe that's because I *am* a father,” he says, but his face turns serious again. “I want to take him somewhere again. Show him all those things.”

“But you can”, Techno just says.

As if it really was that simple. As if really, simply wanting something was ever enough.

Wilbur smiles bitterly.

“I don't even have a passport. I would have to-”

“Phil can get you one. Fast. *You know.*” Techno interrupts him.

Wilbur feels the smile slipping from his face.

“I'm sorry?”

Techno just waves his hand, laughing briefly.

“Nah, I'm just kidding.” His face turns serious only for a moment, squinting a little. “Unless...”

And before Wilbur is even able to say anything, a sudden melody coming from somewhere in Techno's pants breaks the silence.

“Excuse me.” He quickly pulls his phone from one of the pockets.

“No, wait, what the hell was that supposed to-”

“Hello?” The smile from Techno's face drops. He wrinkles his nose, seeming more annoyed than anything. “What do you want now?”

He's silent for a moment, frowning. And obviously disliking whatever he hears on his phone.

“What do you mean?” He stands up, shoving his free hand into his pocket. “Maybe a little warning next time? Who even said I wanted to see you?”

He takes a few steps, turns around on his heels. Pacing around. And when he pauses for a moment, Wilbur's surprised to see that beneath this whole facade of harsh words, there's a hint of a genuine smile.

“This would be a really good place for a '*your mom*' joke, so watch your mouth,” he says, running his fingers through his hair. “Okay. Whatever. The feeling's *not* mutual. Bye.”

And with one unnecessary, aggressive movement, he pushes the phone away from his ear. Wilbur's still able to catch the muffled laugh on the other side, before Techno ends the call.

He sighs, running a hand over his face.

“Who was it?” Wilbur finally asks, twisting the already quite warm bottle over in his hands.

“Dream,” Techno murmurs, as he puts his phone back in the pocket. “He's coming over tomorrow.”

Wilbur frowns as he watches the man sit back down in the chair.

“Oh. I thought...” He shrugs. “You know. That you don't like him.”

And now it's Techno's turn to look at him with sincere surprise on his face.

“What? No.” And for once, his voice doesn't sound all that sarcastic. “He's my best friend.”

Dream turns out to be a tall, only slightly shorter than Wilbur, well-built man. But that's where most of the positive aspects end.

And that's not even counting his hair left in a complete disarray, blond and just a bit too long, and a three-day stubble. He's dressed more like a student, who just spends the last hours of his life hunched over books and currently living off only hot dogs, probably boiled in a kettle, than anyone who can afford an apartment in the city.

And especially not anyone, you want to get into any sort of business with.

Unless in a case where the *'business'* is on a rather illegal side of things. In dirty sweatpants and old, scratched, dark sunglasses, he seems almost perfect for that role.

When he removes them for a moment, shaking his hand, Wilbur vaguely recognizes him as the boy in the picture on top of Techno's desk. With a button nose and piercing, green eyes.

"I'm Dream! Nice to meet you."

His grip is strong, firm, maybe even a bit too much. Like he's deliberately trying to make that impression.

"Wilbur." He forces himself to a polite smile.

"Ah. That cousin from town? Yeah, Techno told me a lot about you."

His car appears to be weirdly similar to him, in a way cars often reflect their owners. Nice, but clearly neglected, with seats covered in all sorts of dark bags and briefcases, the contents of which Wilbur is not sure if he wants to know.

"Really?" He asks with a slight disbelief.

Dream leans forward, quickly grabbing a backpack from the first seat, throwing it over one shoulder. He closes the door behind. And then he smiles even wider.

"Yeah, no, not really." He admits, looking around a bit. "You got a kid tho. Heard a lot about him. Well, where's Techno?"

Despite an earlier promise, that he had no intention of waiting for Dream, they find him in the kitchen. Wiping a clean cup with a towel, clearly trying very hard to seem busy.

"Oh, you're here? Didn't even notice," he says sharply.

Dream smiles only wider, throwing one arm over his shoulders.

And although Techno is much taller than him and definitely stronger, and he makes a face, like he's considering breaking that arm in half - he still lets Dream pull him closer.

"Techno! Old friend!" When Techno's frowns stay frowned, he adds a little quieter, "Are you still mad at me?"

Techno looks at him, wrinkling his nose in his own, funny way.

"Guess."

Dream sighs, but seems weirdly at peace with his own fate.

"But listen. I passed? I passed. So what's the big-"

"Because you always do this!" Techno moves one hand violently, but Dream even flinch. "Why can't you just for once-"

While Wilbur feels he's lacking a lot of context in this conversation, there's something fascinating about the way Dream and Techno talk. Like they had this exact same argument a thousand times already, giving off a strange sense of familiarity.

"Okay, okay." Dream rests his other hand on his shoulder so that they're facing each other. Techno

towers over him like that. “Techno. Tech. The Blade. My *beloved*—”

“Don't ever call me that.”

“Would a bit of cake warm your hurt, cold heart?”

Techno frowns slightly, considering the offer, like he's looking for some kind of tick. And maybe he's right in that part, because when he opens his mouth to say something, Dream immediately adds:

“But I left it in the car.” He smiles, flashing white teeth. “It melted a little. Also, I think I sat on it at one point.”

Looking out the kitchen window, at Dream digging something out from the trunk of his car (something that maybe could have even been a cake at one point), Wilbur leans towards Techno, hesitantly asking:

“What did he do?”

Techno sighs, shaking his head.

“Remembered he had a final essay to write. Four hours before the deadline. At three in the morning.” He looks at Wilbur. “And guess who had to write it for him.”

The cake turns out to be in a very questionable condition.

Which Phil doesn't fail to point out, when he shows up in the living room with Tommy in his arms.

“What the fuck is that supposed to be?” He asks, nodding at the mess in the center of the table.

Dream swallows a bite of the cake, then smiles.

“Good morning, Mr. Minecraft! Done any mining recently?”

Phil doesn't answer. He winces, then looks at Tommy, like he could share his disappointment, mumbling something about the *'fucking video game that ruined his life'*.

Wilbur almost instinctively reaches out, taking Tommy from him.

The boy, still half asleep and drooling all over his plush cow, now stares at the stranger with obvious interest.

“Your son?” Dream asks, and Wilbur shakes his head

“No, that's my brother. The older one is mine.” With his free hand, he points towards the entrance to the living room.

And only then, Dream seems to notice the presence of Fundy, looking back at him from behind Phil's legs.

“Oh. What's up, kid?”

He nods his head, which only makes Fundy blush instantly. He quickly disappears almost completely behind Phil's pants.

"He's shy," Wilbur says, but Dream only shrugs.

"And ginger."

Wilbur's heart aches a bit, but before he can say anything else, Dream stops, fork hung in the air.

And an extremely stupid smile appears on his face.

"Reminds me of someone, you know?"

Techno roans, rolling his eyes.

"Don't even start." He warns sharply, which his friend doesn't seem to care about in the slightest.

"Ow, but you were so cute!" He reaches his hands, squeezing his cheeks in mock affection, "Remember how on the first day of school-"

"Shut up."

"-you cried all day because-"

"Fuck off-"

"-you wanted your *dad*-"

"I am going to kill you."

And apparently, it's not just a warning this time, because Dream's face experiences a particularly violent encounter with the pillow.

Techno's face is red, including the tips of his ears, as he looks at Wilbur, visibly flustered.

Wilbur just smiles, raising one eyebrow.

Eventually, Phil separates them, because Techno doesn't seem to want to give up on that promise.

"Grown ass men, and you still act like children." Tho his voice is sharp, there's a hint of amusement on his face. "What kind of example are you setting?"

"A very good one!" Dream shouts, looking at Tommy. "Hey, kid! If someone ever tries to fuck with you, you just-"

He slams his fist on his open palm in the demonstration.

Techno hits him on the back of the head.

Gently. Lovingly.

"Ow! Come on, I'm just kidding."

In the way Techno and Dream interact, they remind Wilbur a lot of their parents. Maybe a bit more aggressive and vulgar. But there's this mutual care and affection, clearly visible after the years spent together.

In how they talk, move freely, clearly knowing each other's boundaries, without fear of stumbling upon something undesirable and not very pleasant.

It's hard for Wilbur to say, what kind of impression Dream himself made on him.

He's certainly loud, perhaps with a bit too big of an ego and a prone to bragging, but certainly without any kind of bad intentions.

Fundy didn't seem to realize that last part, as he spends the rest of the morning on the couch next to his father, hiding his face in the sleeve of his shirt and clutching his hand tightly.

“Oh, right,” Dream says suddenly, finally ending another, unusually long monologue about his fiancé. “You're coming back with me, yeah?”

He glances over at Techno, who frowns for a moment before a hint of understanding appears on his face.

“Ah. Yes, sure.”

Phil's smile fades.

“Oh, don't even worry, Mr. Minecraft,” Dream says right away, laughing, maybe a little fake. “It's just business. He'll be back in one piece.”

“What kind of business?” Wilbur asks, and Dream smiles.

“Sport company,” he only replies.

Wilbur has the feeling that no matter how often it happens, Phil's never going to get used to it.

Circling around in the kitchen, starting up meaningless tasks, only to stop halfway and get on with something else. Looking out the window for a moment, glancing at the watch hanging on the wall.

And Wilbur knows that feeling very well.

When nothing else can break this strange pressure in your chest, calm your thoughts. When all you can do is just wait, and every minute is gone seems to kill you a little bit more on the inside.

That is why around midnight, watching the man trying to wash the same cup in the sink for the third time, he leans over, turning off the tap and taking it out of his hand himself.

“I'll wait for him.”

This is the first time he's ever said it out loud.

Maybe they've done that before, a bit unconsciously, but now it sounds much more official. When he can no longer hide under stupid excuses.

Much more like a real promise.

And while he couldn't be sure if it really did anything, if Phil actually slept a bit more peacefully because of it - something about the way he looks at him, smiling faintly, assures him, that at least

he can do this one thing for him.

Phil rests a hand on his shoulder.

“Thanks.”

His hand is warm, rough, but firm. Grounding.

“He'll be fine,” he adds, watching Phil climb up the stairs, his cane under his arm.

“I know,” Phil looks at him, and for a moment there's a strange expression on his face. Hard to read.

“But you know how it is.”

He does.

Dream's promise turns out to be a lie.

Well, more it just depends on how you look at it. That night, Techno does indeed come back in one piece.

No one ever mentioned the condition in which that piece will be returned.

He shows up at the door a few minutes after three in the morning, and the sound of the keys turning the lock wakes Wilbur from his shallow sleep.

He sits up on the couch, but before he can stand up, Techno quickly walks past the entrance, disappearing from his sight.

“Techno,” he says quietly, barely above whisper. “Wait.”

He receives no answer, but the footsteps stop. He gets up from the couch, gets out into the hallway himself.

Techno's facing the stairs, hand frozen on the railing. He doesn't turn around, even when Wilbur repeats his name.

“I'm going to bed,” he just says.

Wilbur frowns.

There's something strange about it. About the way Techno stands, with his hands shaking a bit, the hood pulled tight over his hair.

“What's wrong.”

It's less of a question, more of a demand. And Techno only snorts.

“I'm fine,” he says, and Wilbur doesn't believe him for a second.

“Techno.”

“Seriously. Leave me alone.”

“For fucks sake.” Wilbur steps closer. “Stop acting like a kid.”

And he grabs his forearm, turning to face him.

Which, objectively speaking, wasn't probably the smartest move. Techno, almost instinctively, raises his hand, breaking out of his grip.

But he immediately clenches it tightly into a fist, after, lowering it to his side.

Wilbur doesn't even pay any attention to it.

Techno's face is almost entirely purple, covered in deep bruises, with a single cut on his right cheek.

His upper lip still has remains of dried blood from his nose, so swollen and red that the pale scar stands out against it even more.

Few loose strands of hair flow around his face, almost like trying to cover it.

“Happy?” Techno snaps, crossing his arms.

But in the way he avoids his gaze, raises his shoulders a little higher, he doesn't seem all that angry.

Not really.

“Fuck.” Is all that Wilbur manages to choke out.

Instinctively, he reaches his hand out towards him, but stops suddenly. Lets it fall to his side. Techno watches his hand carefully.

“That's nothing. I'm gonna live.” While he clearly tries to sound annoyed, there is a hint of something else in it. Like he's more trying to convince himself.

Wilbur stares at him for a moment, as Techno shifts around.

“Don't look at me like that.” he says, finally meeting his eyes.

Wilbur doesn't really know, why he can't.

He's seen Techno in a similar state before, more than once. But something about how he tried to reassure him that everything's fine, as if he really thought someone would believe it – that reminds him so much of *himself*, that he can't hold back the ache, somewhere deep in his chest.

He's worried about Techno.

Maybe it was obvious, maybe he knew it before, maybe even Techno himself realized it a long time ago. But putting it into words still feels weird.

But maybe also right.

“We should go to the hospital.” he says.

Techno immediately steps back.

“No. No way.”

“Tech-”

“Fuck off.”

“You're bleeding.”

He raises his hand, wiping any remaining blood away with his sleeve.

Wilbur folds his arms over his chest.

“At least let me disinfect it.”

They stare at each other for a moment.

Techno wrinkles his nose, but then winces in pain. He studies Wilbur's face carefully.

And with each passing moment, his gaze softens. And finally he only sighs. His arms relax slightly.

“Okay. Just, hurry up.”

Minutes later, when Wilbur puts the first aid kit on the kitchen table, Techno probably slowly regrets his decision.

“It's not broken,” he says, when Wilbur looks close at his nose. “I would know if it was. Trust me.”

Wilbur doesn't know how much he's willing to believe that.

He had his last first aid course sometime in high school, and he was probably more busy scribbling random words for a potential song lyrics, than memorizing anything.

However, years spend with his quite active and definitely less careful son, got him used to occasional bruises and scrapes.

The way Fundy would squeeze his hand with all the strength of a six-year-old, his eyes shut tightly, counting out loud those few seconds with him, as he disinfected the wound. And then, he would always smile proudly, through his wet cheeks and teary eyes, when Wilbur told him how brave he was.

This is definitely something different.

Wilbur soaks some cotton in disinfectant, turning to look at Techno, who just crosses his arms over his chest.

He winces slightly as Wilbur holds it to the wound on his cheek, but keeps his eyes glued to the floor.

And maybe, when he's wiping off the remaining, dry blood, putting a plaster on his nose, Techno doesn't need Wilbur to hold his hand at all, or comfort him in a quiet, calm voice.

But he looks so pathetic, that Wilbur really wants to.

Instead, he reaches his hand to him.

He stops for a moment, but this time he doesn't back away, carefully brushing a loose strand of pink hair behind his ear, in a very familiar gesture.

Techno closely follows his every move with his eyes.

But he doesn't flinch away from his touch.

“What happened to your hair?” He asks, perhaps a little quieter than necessary.

Techno shrugs.

Wilbur tilts his head, frowning for a moment. He straightens his fingers a few times and clenches them again. Unsure how much he can do, how much he's allowed.

Though that old wall that once separated them no longer exists, it still left a clear line. And neither of them knows what would happen, if they tried to cross it.

And maybe Wilbur is just about to find out.

“Can I...?” He asks, nodding at the comb lying on the kitchen counter.

Techno follows his gaze.

It's hard to read his face. And suddenly he looks like Phil again, in this thoughtfulness, like he saw more than Wilbur, in that simple question.

And then he looks at him again in that weirdly familiar, oddly soft way.

“Okay.”

The last time Wilbur did something similar, must have been all those years ago when his mother would let him play with her hair, laughing at his unsuccessful attempts at different hairstyles.

She taught him how to braid it, guiding his small hands. And while hers always looked so much better, he still remembers how proud of himself he was, when his braids didn't fall apart on the first move.

Her blond hair always seemed to shimmer in the sun.

And back then, when he was still so little, she was the most beautiful woman in the whole world.

Techno's hair is thick, surprisingly soft to the touch, falling in light waves over his shoulders. Though it takes Wilbur a while to untangle it.

Techno turns every now and then to glare at him with each harder tug, but Wilbur only shrugs.

“It's not my fault. You have a whole ass nest up here.”

He runs his fingers through them for a while, while Techno relaxes a bit more, tilting his head slightly back.

Wilbur, much more gently, separates it into three parts.

“Will you finally tell me what's going on? Or are we still playing this game?” He asks suddenly. Wilbur can also see Techno's muscle tighten, arms raised.

Like a lion, ready to pounce, watching him step on this invisible border. Rubbing it with his foot, unsure of the consequences.

He continues to braid his hair; calmly. Trying to keep his hands from shaking.

A few weeks earlier, in the hallway next to the kitchen, Techno looked at him and maybe, just maybe, saw him too, through the rubble of that freshly knocked down wall. Wilbur couldn't be sure.

But now, as Techno turns in the chair toward him, his hair flowing through Wilbur's fingers, he thinks he can be sure this time.

And maybe, the only consequence of stepping just a bit forward, is that he can see him more clearly.

“... Boxing.”

“*Boxing?!*”

Techno covers his mouth with his hand, silencing him. Wilbur winces. It's covered in sweat, dried blood, he can feel it on his face.

“Shut up. You're gonna wake the whole village up.”

Wilbur knocks his hand away, staring at him with wide eyes.

“What do you mean?”

Techno twists his fingers awkwardly for a moment before answering. He looks nervous, it's almost weird seeing him like that. “Boxing. That's a sport, you know?”

“And that's your *'job'*?”

“Yeah! You don't even know, what kind of money you can make on that.” Techno smiles, wide, clearly pleased to be able to finally brag about it. But soon his smile drops, seeing the look Wilbur gives him.

“You make money beating up people? Is that even legal?”

Techno's silent for a moment before mumbling softly:

“... No.”

“No, you don't make money on that or no, it's not legal?”

Techno winces as Wilbur's fingers tighten a little on his hair. Almost a silent warning.

It's quiet.

“Fucking hell!” Wilbur lets go of his hair, slapping his forehead with his hand. Hard. “You're a fucking criminal!”

“Hey!” Techno straightens, clearly offended by this harsh, but accurate statement. “I don't deal drugs or anything. And you're not my father, stop acting like him.”

Wilbur just looks at him in disbelief for a moment. And then feels himself smiling.

“Nah, fuck this. What is this, some kind of... Family of criminals?” He laughs and Techno's face also softens, the corners of the mouth rise slightly.

It's not funny. Not really. But Wilbur doesn't know what else to do, but laugh.

“It's all legal,” Techno explains calmly, as if talking about a very ordinary, everyday activity. “We just have a match in a normal place and that's it. You know, for fun. And then they send me the money later as a... Gift. I have a lot of birthdays.”

Wilbur just stares at him in disbelief. Although, the image of Techno in boxing gloves doesn't feel so out of place at all.

“And where is that *'normal place'*? A dark alleyway?”

Techno looks at him, almost offended.

“Who do you think I am? Dream has a gym. I mean, it's a gym during the day and at night...” He shrugs.

“Ah, so Dream is also involved? Are there any other criminals I should know about?” Wilbur asks, though when he thinks about it, Dream seems surprisingly fit for that role.

“It was his idea!” Techno replies, smiling a little as if he remembered some distant, found memory. “It really brings people together, you know?”

Wilbur doesn't know.

And he doesn't think he wants to know.

“But why?” He says finally, although his head is still full of questions. “You have money. So why...?”

Techno's face changes suddenly, as he frowns, something Wilbur can't quite read.

There's a hint of something in his eye, something dark. Somber, and sad.

“When people see me, they make some... Assumptions. About who I am.” He looks at Wilbur, who feels his cheeks burn slightly. “And they won't stop, no matter what I do. Then why not? Why shouldn't I give them what they want?”

He pauses for a moment, his eyes kept still on something outside the window, above Wilbur's head.

“Besides,” he adds immediately, in a different tone, waving his hand almost casually. “If I want to fight with someone, and they want to fight with me, why not? And if I'm going to make money from it, that's even better. I did it for free back in elementary school.”

Wilbur's silent for a moment.

“Phil knows?” He asks, because it's the only logical thought that can form in his head.

Techno suddenly turns serious.

“I think so. I think he... Figured it out”, he says, a bit quieter than a moment before.

And suddenly, he frowns, wrinkling his nose as he grips his fingers tighter on the back of the chair.

“And that's why he pisses me off so much, when he tries to preach to me. The way he looks at me, like I'm doing something... Wrong. He better look at himself.”

He closes his eyes for a moment.

“Sorry,” he says, more calmly, although it's not Wilbur who he should apologize to. “It's not that... It just frustrates me. You know?”

He looks at him.

And maybe, deep down, he understands. Just a bit.

“So.” Techno turns his back to him, throwing back his hair. “Are you gonna finish this braid, or not?”

Chapter End Notes

Just to explain that dialogue: This is supposed to be like "almost freshly out of war (around 30 years or so)" country, so getting a passport is a real hustle
Was Techno offering to get Wilbur a fake passport? ... perhaps.

I've been sick this whole week and while translating this chapter so if you saw any mistakes no u didn't <3

Also yes minecraft does exist as a game in this universe. Yes I think this is comedy.

Our Last Summer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Surprisingly, knowing exactly what's going on with Techno, seems to calm him down just a little.

It doesn't make it any less stupid or dangerous. But there's some peace, in being able to give it a name.

And the days still go by the same.

Lazy, hot and steamy, only to turn cold and rainy without a warning.

And while Fundy doesn't seem to appreciate the latter, spending those days mostly wandering around the house and complaining, Wilbur's finally able to appreciate those brief moments of peace.

Especially the short moments Phil has for him.

“If you bring me the cooking book,” Phil says, after Fundy announcement that yes, it is possible to die of boredom and he's currently in the process of it, “I can make cupcakes.”

Fundy straightens immediately, eyes big and shiny. Techno, still slightly rocking Tommy's carrier, holds his chair with his free hand when it shifts, pulled away from the table sharply.

“I can teach you,” Phil glances toward Wilbur, smiling slightly.

Opening the locker on one of the cabinets in the living room is apparently far beyond Fundy's abilities. And after a while, Wilbur walks over to him, crouching down and turning the lock.

He quickly finds the right book, but before he's able to reach for it, Fundy leans forward, collapsing onto his back. Wilbur quickly supports him with his arm, tho none of his muscles are particularly happy about it.

“What's that?”

From under the pile of old documents and books, Fundy digs out what appears to be, at first glance, a hideous abstract art. And what turns out to be an equally ugly photo album.

Framed in fake leather, smeared with every possible color of paint.

“This?” Techno, who has apparently followed them from the kitchen, looks over his shoulder. “Our old album.”

And suddenly, though still extremely ugly, the object in his son's hands seems so much more valuable to Wilbur.

“Oh! Are we looking at photos?”

Phil walks from the kitchen, wiping his wet hands on a rag.

Techno immediately looks as if it's the last thing he wants to do, not only today, but in his entire life. But before he's able to protest in any way, Fundy gasps.

“Can we?” He raises the album over his head, accidentally kicking Wilbur straight in the spine with obvious excitement.

Wilbur winces, straightening and letting the boy slide off his back.

Techno looks first at Fundy and then at him. And Wilbur remembers that one conversation, that seemed so strangely distant and close at once.

He's not even sure why he never actually returned to that topic.

Maybe there was something about the way Phil's face darkened when he asked about his parents.

Maybe he just still felt too out of place, too confused, too overwhelmed.

Maybe he was still a little too afraid to know the answer.

But now, Fundy holds the album high above his head, bouncing in place at Phil's feet, with innocent excitement painted all over his face.

And you just can't say no to kids.

A few minutes later, Fundy is still twisting, shifting impatiently on his lap, finally resting his cheek on his shoulder and leaning forward to get a better view.

Techno, still rocking Tommy with one hand, is really the only one who seems dissatisfied with this turn of events. And yet, he stays. He always does.

Like a cat, pretending that it's always just a coincidence he's even in the same room as you.

The reason why he seems to be holding so much genuine hatred for this particular photo album is quickly becoming clear.

The first few pages are almost completely filled with photos of that little boy. With brown hair, a pale scar across the center of his nose. The one, that Wilbur has already learned to recognize as Techno.

But it's only now, in the few photos where Phil's putting his hands on his arms, or the one where Puffy's crouching next to him, that Wilbur realizes how *little* he seems.

The sleeves of his shirts almost always rest loosely around his frail shoulders. And in the photo labeled "seventh birthday", he barely reaches Phil's waist.

Which, looking at him now, seems downright unbelievable. And perhaps Wilbur wouldn't even believe it, if he didn't see it in person, right in front of him.

Phil smiles, a familiar softness across his face as he looks at his son.

“Aw, look how little you were,” he coos.

Wilbur feels himself smiling, as Techno's ears turn a little red.

“I remember, you were so easy to pick up. So small, I could've just hold you all day...”

Techno blushes even more, lifting his arms higher.

“Come on-”

“And then you started to grow. And I don't think you ever stopped.” He leans over Wilbur, pinching the tip of Techno's nose between his fingers, making his son wince as he pulls away abruptly.

“Dad.”

And although Phil laughs with Wilbur, there's something tender, something like nostalgia in it.

Longing for other times.

For when he was still able to hold his baby close, and really feel like it was enough to protect him from the world.

Wilbur wraps his arms around Fundy a little tighter.

But with another photo, all the affection vanishes from Phil's face, and there is a clear sense of some old anger. Wilbur leans in slightly to get a better look.

In the boy next to Techno, he recognizes Dream, with a button nose and fair hair. With one arm thrown over Techno's shoulders, he, almost proudly, shows a large bruise under his right eye to the camera.

“Oh, I remember that!” Techno says, already in a clearly better mood

To which Phil wrinkles his nose (in a way Wilbur has seen so often in Techno).

“Yeah. With how I told you off, you better remember that for the rest of your life.”

He sighs softly, looking at Wilbur like someone who's exhausted but has already accepted his failure.

“They used to get into fights at school all the time,” he explains, wincing slightly. “Him and Dream. We had to tell the principle to just stop calling us about it. They were like that *all the time*.”

“Because he's stupid and that's the only way to convince him that he's wrong,” Techno says simply.

Phil sighs again, as he leans towards Fundy.

“Don't listen to him. Just remember: if you're looking for advice, Techno's never the right choice.”

He touches the tip of his nose with his finger. Fundy blinks. His eyebrows narrow slightly as he tilts his head.

“But Techno's cool.”

“Ha! Heard that?” Techno smiles, wide. “I'm cool. Now listen, kid, if someone is being annoying, it's always morally correct to-”

Wilbur leans down, covering Fundy's ears.

Over the next few pages, Wilbur quickly finds out, that no one bothered to arrange the photos in any particular, logical order.

In some, Phil's still young, with a strange shine in his eyes – smile wide and wild. In others, he's clearly older, next to Puffy, first few gray lines showing in her dark hair.

And with each one, Wilbur leans a little more toward him, staring at the faces he doesn't know, doesn't recognize. Forever frozen in time.

He runs his fingers over the letters, written in a scratchy, messy handwriting at the bottom of one photo.

Philza "Crowfather" Minecraft

“My pseudonym,” Phil explains, staring at the young man he once was.

Uniform tight around his neck, smiling at them from the picture.

His face grows serious and he looks at Wilbur.

“But if anyone ever asks, you have no idea who that is. Got it?”

And so, hearing stories about old friends, people frozen in their youth in those photographs, Wilbur feels more and more like a child. Browsing through the colorful pictures in a book with his parent.

It's a weird thought and feeling.

He brushes it off.

(Reluctantly)

He squints his eyes, his fingers resting on the faded paper, as if trying to remember the strangers, he will never get to know.

Even those few, where Phil's face is stained with mud, the oversized helmet rests on his messy hair.

Even those that have turned into almost cemeteries. Frozen in one place over the years.

Fundy, on the other hand, has lost all interest long time ago. Leaning towards Techno and pulling one of his hands over his lap.

Twisting the gold rings on his fingers, he tilts his head slightly, leaning in to look at some of them closely.

“Can I borrow this one? Please?” He asks, already taking off one ring to put on his own, far too little finger.

“Sure.” Techno shrugs, clearly not really paying attention.

Wilbur, somewhere in the back of his mind, registers when the boy, clearly bored to the limit, slides off his lap and runs up the stairs.

“Who's this?” He asks, picking up one photo

It's not even stuck in place, merely tucked between the pages. Like someone was hesitating whether this is the right place for it.

“Oh.” There is this strange shadow on Phil's face. And although Wilbur already recognized it well, he still couldn't quite read it. “My parents.”

Wilbur freezes for a moment. His hand shakes slightly.

There's a certain resemblance in their faces, something familiar in the eyes of the woman who rests her hands on Phil's shoulders, in the hair of the man in the dark shirt.

And they look... Quite average. Wilbur could have passed them in the supermarket, subway station, without looking twice.

He's not entirely sure what he expected. But he surely didn't expect that this strange longing, for something he didn't have, would ever suddenly be replaced by *disappointment*.

He looks at a photograph of his grandparents. Not feeling any closer to some other Wilbur, from a different, perhaps a bit happier reality.

Wilbur, who visited his grandparents on weekends, who had something more.

And perhaps that Wilbur, whose fate was somehow *kinder* - never really had the right to exist.

Because in this picture, the Real Wilbur recognizes the same coldness in their eyes, that he remembers about his mother.

"Oh." It's the only thing that goes through his throat. He sets the photo aside, resting an unstable hand on his knee.

Phil looks at him for a moment. Eyes distant.

"We never got along," he says suddenly. "I don't know why. I guess just..."

He frowns. He looks older, somehow.

Tommy wakes up for a moment, yawning slowly. Techno pulls the blanket a little tighter on him, never taking his eyes off his father.

"I guess they just wanted something, I couldn't give," Phil finishes finally. "They died, when I was in the army."

His face shifts to something Wilbur recognizes very well.

Regret.

"I couldn't come to their funeral. Your mother," he looks at Wilbur. "She knew it wasn't my fault, but still... I don't think she ever forgave me."

He flips through several pages slowly, stopping at the very end.

And in the little girl in a blue dress, with flowing golden hair, Wilbur recognizes his own mother.

"We were never really close. Maybe that's because of our age gap." Phil shrugs.

He picks up the photo, running his finger over it. Gently.

Then he raises his hand higher, leaning over Wilbur.

"Hey, Tommy. Look." He turns the photo towards the child. "It's your mom."

Tommy doesn't even flinch.

He sleeps, in that blissful unawareness.

And Wilbur, all at once, fully feels the deep cut in his heart that never seemed to fully heal. Leaving behind only a short ache, sleepless nights and brief moments when he let his thoughts drift away.

It's a reminder. A painful one.

His mother is dead.

She's been dead for a long time. And yet, sometimes, it's like she's still there.

In another city, another strange apartment. That he still can hear her voice, see her face.

Like he only needs to dial her number, and she might even answer.

And maybe she would just yell at him, with the same coldness as always. But he would hear that sound again.

Alive.

And yet, still *unreachable*.

And maybe, deep down, that's what he wants.

Phil hesitates for a moment before putting the photos back in place. He looks at Wilbur.

“Maybe you want to keep them?”

Wilbur silently looks at the photograph of his mother, frozen in time, young and alive, for a brief moment.

“No,” he only replies.

Phil doesn't push him. And with his gaze, he seems to understand. Strangely.

He flips the album to the last, blank pages.

“Oh. Honestly, I thought there was more,” Techno says, clearly trying to change the subject.

Awkwardly.

Wilbur couldn't be more grateful. For that distraction from the familiar pressure, building up in his throat.

“Me too.” Phil picks up the topic. “We used to take so many pictures. I don't know why we stopped.” He looks at Wilbur, and smiles, maybe a bit faint, but sincerely. “Maybe you want to add your own photos?”

He puts the album onto his lap

And with this new weight on his thighs, Wilbur thinks there's no greater show of trust.

Like a beginning, a strange encouragement to something he couldn't quite define himself. He runs his finger over the cover.

And the only thing that passes through his mouth is:

“I don't know if I have any good ones.”

Phil, doesn't look like he minds.

There's something warm in his chest now.

“That's okay. We can always take some new ones, but I'm sure you have something. Like maybe... That picture of Fundy's mother.”

Though he adds the last words extremely gently, Wilbur freezes suddenly, feeling every muscle tense together violently.

“What?”

His voice shakes slightly.

“That's the picture, that you have in the hallway? In your apartment?” The smile slowly fades from Phil's face, replaced with worry. “Hey, but it's okay if you don't want to.”

He rests one hand on Wilbur's shoulder.

He stops himself from flinching. His nails dig into his knees.

“If it's something... Fresh. When did she... *Pass away?*”

He's dancing around his words, careful, quiet. Still keeping his hand firmly on his arm.

Wilbur's throat tightens, his heart beating in his chest.

Heavy, hard.

“Sally's not dead.”

He speaks softly, more to himself than to anyone else.

And before Phil can stop him, Techno raises his eyebrows. He tilts his head, overgrown bangs falling around his face.

“She's *not?*”

Phil sends him a sharp look that Wilbur doesn't even notice, staring down at his hands, resting on his knees.

“No,” he says.

“Oh.” For a second, he looks like he's going to let go of his arm. But in the end, his fingers only tighten on Wilbur's sweater. “I'm sorry, I didn't know that-”

“No, she...”

He bites on his lip.

And maybe at any other time, Wilbur would have avoided this conversation completely. Looked away, shrugged.

Maybe with someone else, he would just tell them, truthfully, that it's none of their business.

But now, looking at Phil, whose hand still rests on his shoulder (reassuring, almost, drawing him a bit closer to reality), at Techno, who's staring at him with that strange softness, and the album on

his lap, realizes that maybe it's not *'any other time'* and *'someone else'*.

At *'any other time'*, Wilbur would try to not think about his past.

With *'anyone else'*, he wouldn't let himself lean in a bit, feeling his shoulders droop in this moment of weakness.

Wilbur's past is a burning book, that he set on fire himself.

But maybe, maybe, Techno and Phil aren't afraid to put their hands inside the fire.

He met Sally in a park by the lake, when he was eighteen years old and sizzling with hormones and hatred for the whole world.

She sat down on the bench next to him, while he played sad, sappy ballads on his old guitar. Hoping that, maybe, the ducks would be at least a little bit moved by his music.

(They weren't.)

“You take requests?” She asked.

And she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

With long, dark hair falling over tanned shoulders, delicate face, smile. Light freckles, spilling over nose, cheeks.

“Fundy”? Never heard of it,” he said, typing the name into his old, cracked phone.

“But you'll try,” she replied, and her voice was music by itself.

She crossed one leg, her blue dress wrapped tightly against her thighs.

So he did.

And whatever spell they both tried to put on each other that afternoon - some part of that magic must have eventually work. He ended up in her apartment that very evening.

To this day, he's not sure if Sally ever really expected him to call her the next day.

But he did. And the second, third, fourth time, and before they knew it, he was putting flowers into her long hair, holding her warm hands, kissing her shoulder, whispering empty promises.

Then he rang again, standing in the rain with one, brown backpack clutched in his hand.

“I have nowhere to go,” he said.

And suddenly they were living together and were so wonderfully independent together, just like they always wanted.

And everything was as it should have been until it wasn't.

And Wilbur stubbornly clung to those memories, the sun on her face, their soft song.

And then a little boy was born, named after that same song, and his birth meant the end of something Wilbur wasn't prepared to let go of yet.

He wasn't. He couldn't. Especially not that day, when he woke up alone in an empty bed, an empty apartment, with nothing but a short note left on the table.

When their wardrobe suddenly became a lot emptier, when one pair of shoes from the hallway disappeared, like the cosmetics from the bathroom.

Like she was never there in the first place, like she never even existed, and all that was left of her was the faint smell of her perfume on the pillow. And that one note.

He still wasn't ready a week later, when he sold his guitar. And he would never play it again.

In his pocket there still was that one page, that reread over, and over, until those few words were etched into his mind forever.

'I can't do this. I'm sorry.'

And maybe, that was the saddest, most pathetic part of it all. Maybe that was the first violin, in his pitiful, unfinished symphony.

That he loved her so much, and loved her more than she would've ever be able to love him back.

And he loved her too much for anyone else to fill the void she left behind, and he would still love her after all these years, and maybe still does, no matter how bitter it tastes.

His love was ache, regret, an unfilled emptiness in his soul and heart.

The thought that one day he might forget her - his worst nightmare.

His voice freezes in his throat, and he suddenly realizes he can't speak anymore. Tears, streaming down his cheeks, drip down onto his lap.

He presses his lips tight as he swallows through his tightened throat.

The room's silent, broken only by the soft rattling of rain, hitting against the window.

Until Techno finally speaks, his voice loud, angry. Sharp.

“And she left you alone with the *baby*?”

Wilbur doesn't answer, just shaking his head, feeling his lip tremble. He doesn't know why he's denying it, when it's the truth.

“Wilbur...”

It's the first thing Phil says, and his voice so impossibly warm and calm.

And when Wilbur looks at him, he's surprised to find that his eyes look wet. And there's so much concern on his face, more than Wilbur has never seen in him before.

His hand's still resting on his shoulder, maybe even more firmly than before.

“Wilbur, I...”

He closes his mouth, opens it, clearly trying to find the right words, lost in his own course of thought. Until he presses his lips together.

And suddenly he puts his other arm around him, pulling him close and tight, resting his hand on the back of his head.

And for one moment only, Wilbur forgets why he's crying.

He remembers the last time his mother hugged him.

At the end of high school, when he said goodbye to her at the door. Short. Awkward.

Almost like an obligation, then something she really wanted. She was wearing her gold earrings. They hooked on his hair, pulling it a little.

It's different now.

Because Phil's so incredibly warm, and there's something so comforting in the way he holds him. Like he'll never let him go, like he had just found the right place for him. Here, in his arms.

Wilbur's hunched over, hands awkwardly resting on the couch.

“I'm so sorry,” he whispers, still not letting go. “I'm sorry. I should have... I should've been there for you. It's not your fault, what happened between me and your mother. I should have...”

He hugs him even tighter, hiding his face in his hair.

Another hand, larger, with rings, rests on his back.

“But it's okay,” Phil says firmly, like he's absolutely sure of it. “We're gonna be fine, kid. Okay? *You're* gonna be fine. I got you.”

And suddenly, something finally hits him.

Suddenly the weight of it all falls on him.

And really, all Wilbur can do, is hug Phil back, burying his face in his shoulder and cry like a little kid.

Chapter End Notes

This is so sad, Alexa play "Goodbye My Danish Sweetheart" by Mitski

['Fundy'](#)

Soldiers

Chapter Notes

local depressed man gets more hugs, more next week

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur holds Phil, fingers clasped on his shirt, sobbing against his shoulder, until he can't.

And as much it's extremely tempting, if not a bit childish, to stay this way, it all suddenly becomes weirdly overwhelming.

He pulls away, and almost falls back in, feeling Phil reluctantly relaxing his arms, letting him straighten.

His face feels wet, puffy and probably red, but the sight of Phil's eyes makes him care a little less.

“I, uhm.” He turns to Techno, who gives him a sincere, if a bit awkward smile. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Alright,” Phil still watches him closely, with obvious concern.

Wilbur rests his hands on the couch but hesitates for one moment, placing his feet on the floor.

And at that one moment, Phil pulls him for again, briefly but firmly, kissing the top of his head.

When he locks himself in the bathroom, looking in the mirror, it's difficult for him to understand his own emotions.

Certainly – relief, to let go of everything that had been boiling in him over the last few years.

But maybe also – fear. Because it's been a long time since he allowed anyone to see his past, that he tried so hard to erase every day.

And maybe he was partially afraid of the usual rejection. He expected empty words, cold touch.

Maybe if you get burned one too many times, even the sun doesn't look that bright anymore.

Mostly, tho, he just feels a bit numb. Sleepy. In a good way, he thinks.

There's something warm, hot but never burning, and when he lifts his head, he smiles at his own reflection.

He leans over the sink, splashing his face with cold water.

When he finally turns off the light for that night, rolling around in his bedsheets, someone knocks softly on his door.

“You're asleep?”

He's facing the wall, but still clearly hears Techno's voice. He doesn't answer, just for a moment.

He inhales sharply, propping himself up on his elbows and turning his head.

“Not yet.”

He lights up the lamp by his bed, filling the entire room with a warm, yellow glow. Techno leans over Tommy's cradle.

His gaze lands on the familiar, little stuffed toy that Tommy's still holding in his little hand. He smiles slightly.

But when he glances back at Wilbur, he seems oddly out of place, nervous even, as he slides his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants.

“So, uhm. What's up?”

Wilbur bites down on his lip, trying not to laugh.

Techno swears softly under his breath.

“Fuck. I just... Uh. Never mind, ignore me.”

Despite it, he steps closer, sitting on the edge of the bed, at Wilbur's side.

He's silent for a moment, before he sighs heavily.

“Listen.” He looks at Wilbur. “I didn't know... I thought she... I don't know. I'm so sorry.” He rubs his neck awkwardly.

“Okay,” Wilbur replies, carefully, not entirely sure if he fully understands. “It's fine-”

Techno looks at him, and apparently he didn't understand, because he looks angry now.

“It's not. She left you alone with a baby, Wilbur. *Fucking bitch*- Hey!” He raises his hands, shielding himself from the second blow from the pillow, “What the hell was that for?”

“Don't call her that!”

Techno tugs at his wrists, trying to stop another close meeting with the pillow.

“But it's true,” he says sharply.

Wilbur sighs, feeling a bit stupid with this momentary frustration. Techno slowly lets go of his hands.

“It's just... I still have a hard time thinking about that. You know, sometimes I think maybe it's my fault.” Wilbur stares at his palms.

Techno frowns, when he lowers his pillow. He moves a little closer.

“She...” Wilbur presses his lips together for a moment. “She didn't want kids. And I convinced her to keep it. She never wanted to be a mother, maybe it's my fault that she felt...”

Techno rests a hand on his shoulder, and Wilbur raises his head to look at him.

“But it was her decision, too. Just because she made the wrong choice, doesn't mean she had the right to leave you to deal with the consequences.”

And he says it so confidently, as if he thought, if he tried hard enough, Wilbur would believe it too.

“Besides, is Fundy even-”

But he doesn't finish, pressing his lips tightly together.

“Is Fundy what?”

“Never mind. Listen, Wilbur, I...” He grips his hand tighter on the fabric of his T-shirt, laughing quietly. “I'm really not good at this.”

And maybe, in his stupid pajamas with a golden crown pattern, hair still wet, falling in waves over his back, and a tiny cut from the razor on his jaw, Techno seems just as lost as he is.

“Yeah. Me neither.” Wilbur laughs.

And when Techno pulls him closer and his hair leaves a wet mark on his cheek, Wilbur no longer hesitates to wrap his arm around him too.

And from then on, Phil seems to look at him a little differently.

When he thinks Wilbur doesn't see it, following his movements, with a slightly absent but soft gaze, frowning gently.

And Wilbur, out of politeness, pretends to not notice it at all.

Because truthfully, he's not quite sure how he's supposed to interpret it.

It doesn't mean anything bad, tho, he thinks. He hopes.

Aside from their usual, stiff, every day politeness (which doesn't feel so stiff and insincere anymore), Phil seems to gain a little more confidence.

He still hesitates, when taking a seat near him or when he lets Wilbur fall asleep, cheek pressed on his shoulder (on those nights when Tommy was very eager to keep everyone up at three in the morning).

Wilbur's becoming more and more a part of those little, everyday gestures, warm touches, soft looks.

And maybe, once again, he gets used to it a bit too quickly.

To the way Phil rests his hand on his shoulder when he looks over his shoulder, ruffles his hair in the same way he does to Fundy, the way he pulls him for a hug as a greeting.

Maybe he let himself get too comfortable, too close. Let himself be drawn too easily into this strange family.

But how could he refuse.

He's not surprised when Phil shows up in his room one night, leaning out through the ajar door.

But there's something very strange about the way he looks at him, hesitantly, nervously gripping the doorknob, sliding his feet across the floor. His eyebrows slightly pulled down, dark marks under his eyes, sharpened by the shadow cast by the bedside lamp.

Though Phil seemed to be smiling more and more, he looks strangely tired these days.

“Hey.” And if Wilbur had known him a little less, he might have not even noticed that hint of uncertainty in his voice.

Wilbur pushes his lap he has been trying to get through for the past week onto his lap, and smiles.

“Hi. What's up?”

Phil doesn't answer right away as he sits down on his bed, and Wilbur pulls his legs up higher to make room for him. He watches Tommy sleep for a moment before turning his gaze back to Wilbur.

“What are you reading?” He asks, nodding at the book in his lap.

Wilbur shrugs.

“Something off your shelf. Fantasy, about some imaginary country.” He runs his fingers over the three-colored flag on the cover.

“Ah, that,” Phil nods. “I read it. But I really don't like it.”

“Why?”

Phil leans back, leaning the back of his head against the wall.

“Because my favorite character dies at the end.”

Wilbur's smile drops.

“Thanks for the spoiler,” he curses under his breath, and Phil laughs softly.

“Oops. Sorry.”

They sit in comfortable silence for a moment. Wilbur has a very strong feeling that Phil's trying to delay something, rubbing his shirt sleeve between his fingers.

Phil looks at him again, this time looking a bit more confident.

“I'm gonna visit the cemetery tomorrow.”

Wilbur nods slowly.

“Okay?” He says, a bit unsure of the direction in which this conversation is going

“I mean...” He rubs his neck with his hand in a familiar gesture that Techno must have picked up from him. “To your mother.”

Oh.

Oh.

“O-oh,” he gasps, feeling his fingers grip a little tighter on the sheets.

“And I thought,” Phil continues, “that you might want to come with me.”

Wilbur doesn't answer.

Not immediately, anyway.

He's too busy trying to slow down his breathing, already too fast, too sharp in his chest; his throat suddenly tighten, his shoulders stiff.

He stares at on his own hands, which would probably be shaking more, if they weren't clenched so tightly on the sheets.

And Wilbur hates it.

He hates the fact that he's still *like this*, at every mention of his mother. He hates being like this.

He hates feeling like it will never stop.

“Wilbur? Hey, kid, you're okay?” Phil rests his hands on his shoulders, leaning in a bit, so he can look him in the eyes.

Blue, familiar. Painfully familiar.

Wilbur doesn't relax, but doesn't pull away, silent for a moment, before nodding his head.

“Yes.” His voice is a little hoarse, rough. “I'm fine.”

Phil frowns, almost ready to disagree. But instead, he squeezes his arm, reassuring.

“You're right,” he says, voice strangely calm. “You are fine. Nothing's happening.” Wilbur frowns, too focused on trying to even his breathing to even answer. “Can you tell me more about that book you're reading?”

Wilbur tilts his head slightly

“What?” He swallows hard. “Why?”

Phil just smiles. He drops his hand from his shoulders, down. He pulls Wilbur's pale fingers apart, holding them gently in his own.

“You can tell me about anything you'd like.” His hands are rough, scarred, but maybe that's what keeps Wilbur focused on their weight. “What's your favorite animal?”

“I... Foxes. I guess. I don't know, Fundy...” He takes a deep breath. “Fundy used to be obsessed with them. Talked about them all the time. I know a lot of random facts about foxes.”

Phil smiles at him. So sincerely that Wilbur almost feels uncomfortable, not being able to reciprocate.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And one time, we went to the park. Like, a one close to the forest. And when we were about to leave, a fox ran by the bushes somewhere. Too fast to get a good look or anything, but...”

Another deep breath.

“I remember he was so excited. I don't think I've ever seen him that excited. And I think that's why I like them.” He adds, a bit quieter. “Because it made him so *happy*.”

Phil holds his hands.

“That sounds nice,” he says in a lower voice, matching his tone.

Wilbur feels his shoulders loosen a little.

“Yeah. It was.”

And they sit in silence for a moment, the tight feeling in Wilbur's throat disappearing with each passing moment, leaving behind only that familiar, tired feeling.

“Better?” Phil asks, and he just shrugs.

“Yeah. I think...” He closes his eyes for a moment. “I think so. Uhm. Thanks.”

“It's okay.” Phil still doesn't pull away his hand, and Wilbur is just a little bit grateful for that. “I'm an expert, at this point. It used to happen to Techno a lot, when he was younger.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that.”

“But It's better now. And... I think you should do what he did.”

Wilbur frowns, opening his mouth when it hits him.

His shoulders tighten again.

“No,” he says sharply, putting his hands back.

“Wilbur-”

“You're not sending me to fucking shrink! I'm not crazy.”

Phil looks at him for a moment. And this time, the concern in his eyes doesn't feel so reassuring.

“Of course you're not. I just think it would really help-”

“And I think that you're the last person who gets a say in that,” he snaps.

Silence.

Phil pulls his hands back, against his lap.

“I ...” Wilbur starts. Something flips, inside his stomach.

Phil doesn't speak for a moment, staring ahead with a slightly distant gaze, but he silences him with a wave of his hand.

“No,” he finally says in a weird, almost unknown voice. “No, you're right. You know what's best for you.”

He turns to Wilbur, smile bitter, almost like a grimace.

“I'm still going tomorrow, probably around nine,” he adds. “You know where to find me, if... Yeah.”

He stands up and Wilbur suddenly feels his heart beating a little faster, and he quickly reaches out to grab his sleeve.

He opens his mouth to say something and knows perfectly well what he *should* say. But looking into Phil's familiar eyes, the only thing that passes through his throat is:

“Okay.”

Wilbur's sitting in a car and he's an idiot.

Or rather: he's sitting in a very hot car, his dark shirt sticks to the skin on his back, and looking at Phil next to him, he feels a little guilty.

Though Phil just smiled at him, like he always did when he saw him that morning in the kitchen, nervously stuffing his hands into the pockets of his pants, Wilbur couldn't shake off that familiar squeeze in his chest.

Phil doesn't seem to hold a grudge. And maybe he's acting like nothing even happened.

And maybe that's what hurt him the most.

He hasn't slept much during the night, turning from side to side for a long time. So now, on the disgustingly green car seat, his head involuntarily slides back. But even tho his exhaustion is slowly catching up with him, he can't let himself just drift away.

The fact that every part of his body seems to be sweating ten times more than usual definitely doesn't help.

Looking at it now, maybe he should have chosen something a bit more 'light', or just than dark pants and a long shirt. Or at least, Phil would agree with him on that point.

“You're going dressed like that?” He asked him in the morning, getting in the car.

Phil, wearing a way too bright T-shirt and shorts, just shrugged.

“Why not?” He adjusted his dark glasses, sitting behind the wheel. “Not like they're gonna see me anyway.”

It was hard to argue with that logic. And Wilbur definitely hasn't visited enough graveyards to disprove it.

So he just shrugged, waving goodbye to Fundy.

And now he's starting to regret not doing the same.

The silence in the car isn't really 'awkward', and the music from the radio is a nice, buzzing noise, but still, Wilbur feels his fingers tightening on the fabric of his pants.

Phil doesn't seem angry. He doesn't even seem irritated, tapping with his fingers on the steering wheel, humming softly to the music.

And yet.

Because maybe he wants Phil to just tell him what he has been telling himself all this time.

Maybe he wishes he would just yell at him, his eyes full of that familiar coldness. To do at least one of those things he'd gotten used to through all these years.

Maybe if he would start acting more like his sister, Wilbur would remind himself why he can't be this vulnerable ever again.

And when all the tension growing in him since yesterday's evening, coupled with a strong sense of guilt, finally presses on him too hard, he says:

"I'm sorry."

Phil doesn't answer right away, clearly lost in thoughts. Then glancing quickly in his direction, frowning behind dark glasses.

"What for?"

"You know." Wilbur shrugs. "Yesterday."

Phil's face softens instantly. He pulls his glasses up.

"Ah." He just smiles. "All right."

Wilbur's silent for a moment, his fingers still nervously shaking, looking away.

Despite the heat, he can see some heavy clouds on the horizon.

"You're not mad?" He asks.

And immediately winces, feeling how childish it sounds. But before he can say anything else (preferably: "please forget everything that just came out of my mouth"), Phil laughs.

"Why would I be? Please, that wasn't even a proper fight. Just..." He takes his hand off the steering wheel for a moment, making a strange gesture with it. "Passionate exchange of beliefs. You should hear me argue with Puffy. One time, she told me that I should go drown in the sea, since I clearly wasn't using my brain anyway, and shouldn't waste the oxygen for other."

Wilbur feels himself smiling. He bites down his lip.

"Still. I shouldn't-"

"Nah," Phil cuts him off. "You were right. About me." He pauses for a brief moment. And although his voice sounds the same when he speaks again, there's a hint of something else on his face. "I'm a fucking hypocrite."

And it's hard to disagree, so Wilbur just shrugs.

And he could let it go.

He could accept that answer, let it soothe his conscience.

But no matter how many times Phil proved that the bear was dead, Wilbur couldn't help but to keep poking.

"Yesterday you looked angry," so he says, and waits for the bite.

Which is not coming.

Or at least, not in a way expected.

Because Phil's smile fades a bit and there's that familiar bitterness on his face, like always when he's considering whether he should be giving an honest answer.

"I wasn't angry," he finally replies, slowly. "Just..."

Pauses for a moment.

The car slows down, as they stop behind someone at a traffic light. Phil's hands drop off the wheel.

And he looks at him, and his eyes are so bright in the sun.

"Wilbur, do you think Techno is crazy?"

Wilbur feels his eyes widen.

"No!" He stutters over his own words. "Of course not, why would I- No."

Phil hums, as he rests his hands on the wheel again.

The car moves smoothly.

"You said you wouldn't see a doctor because you're not 'crazy'."

His voice is calm, but Wilbur still feels his face turn red. This time it's not from the heat.

"Oh. I know, but... I didn't mean that." He runs her fingers through his hair.

Phil glances at him quickly.

"You're getting worked up again." But there's no mockery in his voice and that familiar, gentle look on his face.

Wilbur feels his jaw clenching anyway.

"I'm not," he says, sharp, and Phil hums again.

"Relax. Deep breaths."

Wilbur curses under his breath, but finally relaxes his shoulders, as he rests his head against the back of the seat.

And with the third exhale, he says, much quieter:

"I just don't like someone telling me that... I don't fucking know. That I can't cope or something." He raises his arms; the fabric of his shirt touches his jaw. "I'm doing well. *Right?*"

He doesn't have to look at Phil to guess the unreadable look on his face.

"I think you're doing the best you can."

Wilbur frowns.

He's not entirely sure how to interpret that, and Phil seems to quickly realize it too, as he adds:

“Let's say, that I hired a maid,” he starts, and Wilbur looks over at him, feeling more and more lost in the conversation, “to help around the house. Now, does that mean that I suddenly can't clean by myself anymore?”

“I don't know. You said it yourself, you're old and-”

Phil closes his eyes for a moment, taking a very deep breath, and Wilbur can't help to give him a faint smile.

“You're not helping.”

“Oh, I know, I know.” He rolls his eyes, leaning his elbow against the window. “I know what you mean. But still.”

“Still what?”

He stares at his own lap for a moment, before resting his cheek in his hand.

“I still don't understand why would I even... Like, it's not fucking... Shell Shock, or whatever.” His voice is almost a whisper. “So why am I *like this*?”

The music on the radio falls smoothly, into the next song.

“You don't have to fight in a war to experience bad things, Wilbur.” His voice is calm, but somewhat distant, filled with a strange melancholy. “Life was never kind in that way.”

There's more dark clouds on the sky now.

And maybe, Wilbur still doesn't understand.

And maybe he's not sure how long will it take for Phil's words to actually start making sense in his mind.

But maybe, at least now, in his sweaty shirt, with the soft music filling the silence, leaning his arm against the warm glass, he can wait for it.

He can wait. He has time.

“Think about it.” Phil looks at him, maybe even a moment longer than he should while still driving.

Wilbur takes a deep breath.

“I can't promise anything.”

“Promise.” Phil's voice is oddly soft. “Promise, that you'll *try*.”

Wilbur closes his eyes.

“Okay,” he says, quietly.

And Phil smiles.

“Yeah. That's what I thought,” he adds, in a much lighter, playful tone. “I'm the master of negotiation.”

Wilbur winces, suppressing his own smile.

“Yeah. You're so good at talking.”

Phil smiles a little wider.

“You know, they used to call me *'The Angel of Death'*.” He taps on the wheel with his fingers.

Wilbur raises his eyebrows slightly.

“‘Of’? Who's Death then?”

Phil pulls his dark glasses over his eyes.

“Depends on who you ask.”

Chapter End Notes

school's killing me fucking hell

FOR THE RECORD. Wilbur isn't like. Pro-life or anything, he just wanted a kid

--

thank you guys for all the nice comments and messages on tumblr!! they really make my day :)

--

Wilbur calling Phil's ptsd "shell shock" gives you the general idea of what his mental health awareness is

Love Isn't Easy (But It Sure Is Hard Enough)

Chapter Notes

there's a lot of fake deep shit in this chapter, so prepare yourselves

also c!Schlatt but only mentioned this once

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The cemetery is empty.

Empty in the 'living people' sense, anyway.

Wilbur steps out of the car, stretches his arms, feeling the familiar numbness in his muscles, wincing when his wet shirt sticks to his back.

Phil rests a hand on his shoulder, and suddenly he's holding a big, if a bit wilted, bouquet of flowers.

“Come on,” he says, sliding his hand between his shoulders, leading him towards the gate.

Like he's afraid Wilbur will run the other way and never come back again.

And maybe, it's not even that stupid. Because, walking the empty stone path between the graves, he feels this strange ache again.

Too strong to be called '*emptiness*', too confusing for him to name.

When he looks at the same path he was walking a few months ago. When his life changed so abruptly, and he suddenly realized that maybe he never really had it under control, after all.

If he thought more about it, maybe there was something poetic about how the sky seemed to suddenly darken, heavy clouds over the hot sun.

If this was a movie, maybe he would even say it was '*too on the nose*'.

He looks at Phil, but his face, still partially hidden by the glasses, is hard to read. As always.

His jaw tightens for a moment, long earring next to a pale scar.

He turns his head, gives him a faint smile.

And as he stands in front of her grave, all Wilbur can think about, is that all of these emotions, all of this piling up, have ultimately led to a pretty... Dissatisfying conclusion.

To one gray, slightly neglected, indistinguishable between the others, tombstone with a familiar name.

Disappointing. Clumsy.

Phil takes the flowers from his hands, putting them inside one of the empty, cheap, plastic vases

cluttering the stone surface.

And all Wilbur can do, is to stare at the familiar words of a prayer, carefully engraved under her name.

He stares at them, knowing his mother will never look at him again with her cold eyes, with her blonde hair falling down over her face like gold.

That she will never laugh again, holding his face in her hands.

That she will never call him *'her little boy'* again, and that maybe he hadn't really been one for a long, long time.

That she will never meet her only grandson.

“Do you want to pray?” Phil asks, following his gaze.

“No,” he says, after a moment's hesitation. “No, I'm not really... Religious. I don't think.”

Phil nods, as he stands with his back straight, almost too formal.

“Yeah. Me neither.”

It's quiet, for a long moment.

Phil takes off his glasses, turning them in his hands.

“I think it takes some courage.”

Wilbur turns to face him. He frowns.

“To be religious, in a sense.” Phil tilts his head slightly, the long earring bumps against his jaw. “Being able to trust in something that you cannot even be sure exists so much, that you're able to put your whole life into it's hands.”

He furrows, like considering something.

“But maybe that's the whole appeal. Maybe sometimes all you can do is pray that someone will take the control.”

He's silent for a moment before looking at Wilbur. He smiles a little awkwardly at the look on his face.

“When you get older, you have a lot of time for philosophical questions,” he explains, laughing easy.

Wilbur rubs his neck with his hand.

“O-oh. I... I never really thought of it that way,” he says, then adds in a slightly lighter tone. “Apparently I'm not that old yet.”

Phil laughs with him.

“No. No, you're right.” And suddenly, his face turns serious when he looks at him in that soft, if a bit sad, way. “You're *so* young, Wilbur.”

"I'm an adult," he replies, slightly unsure how to adjust to this sudden change of tone.

"How old were you, when Fundy was born? Like, twenty?"

Wilbur nods, and Phil curses under his breath.

"Fucking hell. You were practically a kid yourself." He laughs again, but there's more bitterness to it this time.

Wilbur frowns.

"I-"

"You'll understand when you get older," Phil interrupts him.

And for a moment he just studies his face. Then sighs, looking away.

"You're in a very particular mood today," Wilbur says, slowly.

"I'm sorry. It's just because of this..." He makes a sudden movement with his hand. "Everything."

Wilbur nods slowly.

They stand in silence, staring at that gray tombstone.

And Wilbur realizes that Phil is the only person he could share this moment with.

He doesn't think Techno would ever be interested, and while he has definitely seen him in a much worse state, for some reason this feels too intimate for someone, who won't be able to share his grief with him.

And the very thought of Niki, his wonderful, amazing Niki in a place like this, at a grave from a funeral where nobody cried, feel so... Wrong.

And Fundy...

Fundy.

He doesn't notice how the clouds above their heads darken, until the first drop of rain falls on his nose.

He looks up.

"She was an even number, you know?" Phil says, suddenly.

Wilbur frowns, turning his head. There are a few ideas in his head about what that sentence could possibly mean, each a little more disturbing than the other.

"I'm sorry?"

"I keep count. Of all the funerals I've even been to," he says, voice a bit too calm.

He pauses for a moment, staring ahead. And then he looks up at Wilbur, an awkward smile flashing across his face.

"That's so weird, isn't it?"

“I...” He presses his lips together, trying to collect the words properly, until he finally just shrugs. “I don't know.”

It is. For sure.

But somehow, looking at Phil in his dark glasses and far too bright shirt, with the scars slowly climbing up his arm, something tells him that if he should expect that from anyone, it was him.

Fitting, strangely.

“And...” His voice's a bit too uncertain. “And what number...?”

Phil's smile twitches, just a little.

He takes off his glasses, turning them around for a moment in his hands mindlessly.

“Twentieth.” His voice is low, distant and unfamiliar. And when he looks up at the grave in front of them, something like melancholy flashes across his face. And he suddenly feels a little less present.

“... Oh.”

Because really, it's probably the only thing Wilbur can say.

“Death is a human thing, Wilbur,” he adds, sighing softly. “It's just that sometimes... It's harder for us to remember that.”

Wilbur's silent, staring at the name engraved on the tombstone.

“Does it ever get easier?”

“Letting people go?” Phil laughs, loud and bitter. “No. Absolutely not.” He follows Wilbur's gaze. “But maybe not everything has a simple solution. Maybe some things aren't meant to be easy.”

They stand a moment longer before Phil rests a hand on his back.

“You wanna go back?” He asks

Wilbur nods.

Before they even reach the car, the rain picks up. They run the last few meters, covering their hair with their hands.

They slam the door behind them, and Phil's breathing fast, as he leans against the seat.

And at that moment, when he's clearly just trying to catch his breath before starting the engine, Wilbur asks the one question that has been boiling up in him for the last hour:

“Should I tell Fundy?”

Phil stops for a moment, hands halfway reaching towards the keys. He lowers his hands to his lap, looking at him.

“About what?”

“About... About mom.”

Phil looks at him closely, and hums.

“I think that's your decision,” he says finally. “But I guess it's better for him to hear that from you, than someone else.”

Wilbur breaths out slowly, staring at his own hands.

“I don't know.” He sounds way too quiet, way too weak. “I don't know what to do. I know *I should* be honest with him, and I know that *he should know*. That he has the right to. But I just feel like she... Doesn't deserve it.” As soon as the words leave his mouth, heavy and burning like soot on this tongue, he feels something inside him tighten. “Fucking hell. That sounds awful.”

He jerks his head up, looking at Phil.

His throat feel sore, even tho he hasn't said that much after all.

“Do you think I'm a bad person?”

Its hangs between the both of them, for a second.

“I think you think too much, Wilbur.”

He reaches out, brushing his wet hair from his face.

And his eyes are as similar to his mother's, but right now he looks as different from her as it gets.

“You'll do what you think is right,” he says, then sighs, as Wilbur's hands tremble slightly. “Come here.”

He holds his other hand out to him.

And maybe it's childish. And a bit silly. And stupid.

But Wilbur doesn't hesitate to throw himself into his arms.

Phil holds him close, and for a while they just sit there. Wilbur feels his tense muscles relax slowly.

Ever a while, Phil lowers his hands, pulling away a bit, but Wilbur only holds tighter, burying his face in his shoulder.

Phil laughs, a bit bitter, a bit happy, resting his cheek on his head.

“I thought you wouldn't like that.” He says suddenly.

“What?” Wilbur asks, but the fabric of the shirt makes it sound a bit more like a strange grunt.

“You know. This.” He shrugs with his free shoulder, running his hand up and down his back.

And Wilbur isn't sure what to say.

Because really, Phil is right.

He wouldn't, normally. And maybe if it was someone else, Wilbur would never allow himself to have this moment of weakness, holding up the walls he built around him so many years ago.

But it's Phil.

So he just sighs, shaking his head.

Phil's advice turns out to be pretty useless, actually.

When they're back home that afternoon, Wilbur's mind is crumpled, like different pages from books, that someone with a terrible aim tried to throw at the bin.

He feels like a crumpled piece of paper.

Fundy's fast asleep on the couch, his dark cap slipping up to one side, ruffling his hair, his cheek resting on Techno's chest. And although after his last '*job*', Techno still looks a bit like he got hit by a tractor, he seems strangely calm in his sleep.

Phil looks at them for a moment, smiling, then at Wilbur, one finger raised to his lips.

Wilbur rests his hand on the door frame.

And for a moment, he just looks at Fundy.

His only son, stretched out on the couch and Techno, snoring softly, with the TV still playing in the background.

And looking at him now, and holding him in my arms for the first time, and hearing his first words, and squeezing his tiny hands as he took his first steps, and brushing his red hair, Wilbur always had that one thought in his head.

That his little boy, who still came to his room if he had a bad dream, who drew him birthday cards, who looked at him and smiled with eyes big and bright - deserves everything.

And maybe, it's finally time for him to decide on what exactly that means.

"I'm going for a walk," he says quietly.

Phil looks at him, frowning.

"You're alright?"

"Yeah," he answers, maybe a bit too fast. "Really. I just need to get some air."

Phil doesn't look particularly convinced, but in the end he just nods.

A few minutes later, Wilbur regrets not postponing his breakdown by even five minutes, to at least have time to change that damn shirt.

Or take a shower.

That would be nice, he thinks.

The dark fabric sticks to his back, as he pushes his sweaty hair away from his forehead.

The sky had already cleared, casting bright rays of sunlight on his skin. And Wilbur just looks up, pausing for a moment on the side of the road.

And between the heat, the muffled sounds of the sea, and the soft chirping of birds, he feels so impossibly lost in this peace.

His throat tightens a little, and suddenly he can feel the sweat running down his neck, his wet hair-

Something nudges his shoulder.

He spins around. His heart skips a bit against his chest.

And Puffy, in a dark blouse with big sleeves, smiles at him.

“Oops. Didn't mean to scare you.”

Wilbur just sighs, as he runs his hand over his face.

He looks down at the grocery bags in her hands.

“Can I-” And before he can even finish, Puffy's already shoving the bags into his hands.

“I thought you'd never ask,” she sighs, brushing back a few white curls that slide from under her headscarf. “It's hot, isn't it? Could you be a doll and help me carry those home?”

Wilbur just nods

Partially because he supposes that's what expected from him (and he's also not an asshole).

And partially, because he still feels a bit dull, and every distraction sounded so much nicer than the silence now.

Puffy leans against the arm he offers her.

“Sorry for scaring you,” Puffy says, walking next to him at a slow pace. “It's just,” she raises her head high enough to look at him, “you looked like a young man with a serious dilemma.”

Wilbur's silent for a moment, staring at her, eyebrows raised.

“How did you-”

“I didn't.” She shrugs, looking particularly pleased with herself. “I always say that. And I'm usually right.”

Wilbur starts seriously wondering if this part of the country really is only inhabited by a very specific type of people.

And what does it say about himself.

“Come on,” Puffy urges him, patting his hand with hers. “What's bothering you? You know, old

people have a lot of wisdom to share.”

Wilbur looks at her. He smiles, narrowing his eyes.

“Like what?”

“Like: when you reach a certain age, people will just start doing things for you.” she says, looking very smug, nodding at the grocery bags in his hand. “It's great. Free labor.”

Wilbur laughs softly.

And for some reason, he realizes that maybe, it's not that hard for him to say it out loud.

Maybe because Puffy is still, after all, barely anything more than a stranger.

Maybe because he's already so tired, and no longer has the strength to keep it to himself.

Or maybe because the heat already fried his brain and common sense to the point of no return.

“If you had a kid,” he starts slowly, feeling his heart a little heavier in his chest. “And a family member who was... That you didn't get along with. Would you tell the kid about them? Knowing that...”

And suddenly, his confidence disappears. His throat tightens, and so does his grip on the bags; his fingers pale.

And suddenly it's way too hot, too loud, even tho the only sound he can hear, is his own voice.

“That maybe he'll want to know more. And you don't know how much you can say, until it starts to hurt too much. And he has the right to be angry with you for lying, but you just wanted to protect him, but you don't even know what *from* and-”

His voice gets softer, shaky, until he stops. His legs ache.

And, as he puts his hand to his mouth, he realizes that he's crying.

He quickly rubs his eyes.

“Sorry.”

Puffy has a weirdly serous look on her face. Frowning slightly, almost like she's actually trying to make sense of his rambling.

She rests her hand on his shoulder, a bit hesitant. But he doesn't move away.

The sun's falling on her face and now, when she's not smiling, she's actually starting to look her age.

Her jewelry sparkles.

“Wilbur, do you know why Tubbo lives with me?”

Wilbur blinks. And for a moment, he forgets to cry.

“What?”

She leans down, taking the groceries from his tightly clenched hand.

“Come. I'll tell you something. But only over tea.”

And, resting a hand between his shoulders, she gently leads him forward.

Puffy's house, somehow, looks exactly like he imagined it.

Low ceiling, with a doorway where he almost has to bend over to not get caught on the frame. The interior is cluttered, cramped, but surprisingly cozy, in its own unique way.

In addition to the exceptionally ugly white tablecloth, curtains from at least twenty years ago, and an old landline telephone, there is a particularly distinctive scent in the air that Wilbur can only label as heavy perfume combined with old wood.

Puffy puts the groceries down in front of the door with a heavy sigh, then straightens, looking at one door leading away from the living room.

“Niki!”

A flash of familiar pink hair emerges from that room. Though she looks tired, her face brightens visibly when she notices him.

“Oh! Wilbur!” She quickly runs up to him, throwing her arms around his shoulders, pulling him closer; her long skirt twirls around her legs when she pulls back. “How are you?”

“... I'm alright,” he lies, hesitant.

And if she noticed his shaky hands, his damp eyes, and his messy hair, she decided to keep it to herself.

“How is Tubbo?” Puffy asks, and Niki smiles even wider.

“Great! Hardly even cried. I gave him something to eat about an hour ago, so... Oh!” She looks at the old clock, hanging on the wall. “I have to go. I have an appointment with my hairdresser.”

And before Wilbur can think to say goodbye, she's already pulling shoes over her feet, quickly disappearing through the door.

Wilbur looks out the window as he walks onto the road, adjusting her bag on her shoulder.

Puffy sighs, smiling at him.

“Teenagers. Always in the rush...” She shakes her head, pointing at one of the chairs at the table, taking off her shoes with her other hand. “Sit down. I'll make some tea.”

Wilbur looks at the chair that's probably older than he is, but eventually sits down, wincing a little as it creaks under his weight.

Puffy disappears quickly into the kitchen, and Wilbur looks around at the flowery wallpaper, quickly catching a glimpse of several family photos on display. In some he recognizes Dream, in others Phil, only much younger. And Puffy herself, smiling at the camera from old photos.

When Puffy comes back, she sets a flowery mug, still steaming from the boiling water, in front of

him.

“Sugar?” Wilbur just shakes his head.

Puffy peeks inside the other room, as if to make sure the baby hasn't disappeared in those two minutes she was gone, before finally sitting down across from him.

And for a long moment they're both silent, Puffy staring at him very intensely, and Wilbur very intensely avoiding her gaze.

“What?” He mumbles, feeling his cheeks sting slightly.

Puffy shrugs.

“I was waiting for you to say something.”

Wilbur sighs; slumps further into his chair. He turns the mug around in his hands, watching the dark tea swirl.

“Sorry,” he says. “For... For that. I just had a very shitty day.”

Puffy nods, maybe a bit too serious.

“And how does that make you feel?”

Wilbur blinks.

“... Shitty?” He answers slowly, and Puffy blushes, laughing and waving her hand.

“Sorry, sorry. I just always wanted to be a psychologist”

Wilbur looks at her, eyebrows raised.

“Okay?”

She grabs the sugar bowl on the table, adding it to her own tea.

“But that didn't really work out, did it?”

And suddenly her face looks more serious. Sad, almost.

She rests her elbows on the table, sighing. And her gaze is so piercing that Wilbur feels like she can look through his flushed face, his messy hair, to somewhere deeper. And he's not at all sure, if he likes the thought of that.

“Wilbur. Listen to me.” Her voice is soft, gentle. “I don't think I'm... What you need right now, looking at what I saw, but-”

“I'm not going to a fucking-”

Puffy raises her hand, and he stops.

“Don't interrupt a woman when she's talking.”

And Wilbur just closes his mouth, his arms limp.

“But,” Puffy starts again, “I know something about life. And I know,” she leans down, to look him

in the eyes (he doesn't even know, when he lowered his head), "that most of the time, things aren't as complicated as they seem."

Wilbur stares at his hands clasped around the cup.

"You think so?"

And maybe there's a little too much bitterness in his voice. Puffy leans back, hard against her chair and crossing her arms over her chest.

"Tubbo's my nephew. You know that, right?" And when Wilbur nods hesitantly, she smiles without a hint of happiness. "And why do you think he lives with me?"

Wilbur, thinks for a moment. But voicing his thoughts, although he was very clearly asked about them, seems strangely inappropriate.

And when he finally opens his mouth, Puffy cuts him off immediately.

"If you thought that's because my brother almost drank himself to death a few months ago, you'd be right."

Wilbur slowly closes his mouth.

"O-oh."

"Uhm. Yeah."

Puffy sighs, tilting her head, so she can look at the other door. And her gaze, though soft and warm, suddenly seems oddly distant.

Wilbur awkwardly takes a sip of his tea.

It's bitter, stinging lightly on his tongue.

"Schlatt and I..."

She thinks for a moment, like trying to collect the right words.

With one hand, mindlessly, she twirls her curls on her finger.

"Our parents always wanted a boy. And when I was born, our mother couldn't get pregnant. For a long time, so they stopped trying. And then suddenly," she shrugs, almost casually. "Schlatt was born."

Wilbur's not entirely sure if she actually expects him to talk too, but after a moment of silence, he says:

"Oh. I mean, that's good. Isn't it?"

Puffy smiles stiffly. It doesn't reach her eyes.

"Yeah. They thought so, too. Until the little shit grew older and became very interested in gambling. And drugs. And was home only to look for more things to steal and sell. And then..."

And there's a weird look on her face.

When she looks to the side, her eyes seem hazy and her voice much softer.

“And then there was The War...” She takes a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment. “And I think nobody was the same after that.”

Wilbur watches the scars on her hands as she twists the bracelets on her wrists.

This time, Wilbur doesn't try to break the silence.

“I got home. I got pregnant, had Dream. Then Phil adopted Techno, and I-”

And Wilbur almost chokes on his tea.

“Techno is adopted?!” He manages to whisper, between one coughing fit and another.

Puffy looks at him, seeming as surprised as he is.

“You didn't know?”

“How was I supposed to know?”

Puffy looks at him, like he just let her down in so many ways.

“Techno lost his parents during War. And Phil...” She stares into her almost empty cup. The warm tea doesn't look back. “I think he felt guilty.”

Wilbur feels his fingers grip tighter on his own mug.

“I didn't know...” he says quietly, and Puffy just shakes her head.

“Anyway,” she continues. “Schlatt always seemed much more interested in getting in and out of rehab, than spending time with his nephew. And sometimes... He was never aggressive,” she adds immediately, at the sight of Wilbur's face. “At least, not to us. He was just... *Unpleasant.*”

She frowns at one of the photos on the wall.

Dream, years younger and with a few less teeth, smiles back.

“And then suddenly he disappears for a few months. I didn't even know if he was still alive, to be honest. Until suddenly, I find out he has a son! Guess how.”

He looks at Wilbur, but he just shrugs.

“From the hospital, because he almost fucking killed himself. He lost his parental rights, obviously. And well, the kid ended up with me.” She spreads her hands, laughing softly. “I mean, look at me. I could be his grandmother!”

Wilbur, still not quite sure where this conversation ends, waits for a while.

Puffy rests her hands on the table, looking directly at him again.

“Schlatt's a fucking bastard,” she says, so straightforward and honest that it's hard to disagree. “And in a few years, Tubbo will grow up. He'll want to meet his father.”

Wilbur looks towards the door, the room where the baby's still sleeping.

A child, who still doesn't know he got a shitty deal in life.

“And that will hurt,” Puffy says, her voice sharp. “What his father was and will be. And it’ll hurt if he changed now, when it’s already too late, and it’ll hurt if he hasn’t changes at all.”

Wilbur knows.

Still, he looks up at her.

“But I can’t take that away from him. I can’t take away the pain, he has the right to feel.”

And that evening, Wilbur leaves Puffy’s house with a thousand questions still pounding in his head.

And one, simple answer.

Chapter End Notes

Idk if there will be a chapter this week cuz I’m going on a family trip. But I’ll try!
Maybe my sister will upload for me

Edit: literally forgot to name the chapter all i do is bring shame to this family

Disillusion

When Wilbur was eight, his teacher told him he had a problem with *'controlling his emotions'*.

Which meant, roughly, that he burst into tears when she threatened to give him a bad mark for supposedly not paying enough attention during lessons, and it took them half an hour, three other teachers, and one phone call to his mother, to finally calm him down.

His mother still wore her golden earrings back then, and she curled her hair on little pieces of ribbons every night, and her eyes were still warm.

And when she knelt down in front of him, wiping his wet cheeks and softly repeating *'Oh, honey, it's alright...'*, suddenly everything really was better, just for a moment.

“Absurd,” she cursed under her breath as they walked home, either really thinking, or just hoping he wouldn't hear her. “Fucking circus. Emotional control, my ass. He's just a kid...”

Of course, Wilbur remembered that day quite differently.

He mainly remembered that the old bitch that his teacher was, had never been particularly fond of him. According to her, he was always either interrupting the lesson or not paying attention, and it was all unfair and completely stupid.

And now, walking back inside the house, he would give up anything to still be able to this that way.

He would love to blame all his problems, worries, fears on someone else.

To blame on some invisible force or person, taking the weight off their own chest.

Hide from the world in his mother's arms.

But he can't. Not anymore.

And the thing he's so afraid of right now, sits on his bed, shifting some stones from one hand to another.

His son, his little son, who raises his head, smiling wide at the sight of him.

The photo album under his arm suddenly feels a lot heavier.

“Hey, little rascal,” he tries to sound a lot more relaxed than he actually is, walking closer, ruffling his hair. “What are you doing?”

The boy smiles even wider.

“Revolution!”

Wilbur blinks.

He looks at the pile of rocks, back to his son, and back to the stones.

“... Oh?” He raises one eyebrow, sits on the edge of the bed.

“Yeah! These are the good guys, and this,” he explains, pointing from one pile to the other, “is the police. Oops.” And with a smile, he knocks one rock off the bed. “Death to the bourgeoisie.”

Wilbur thinks.

That Fundy has been definitely spending far too much time with Techno.

And how to start a conversation, that he wasn't even sure was necessary a few hours ago.

“Fundy. We can talk?” He finally says, and while the boy still seems busy parroting his uncle's radical views, he nods in acknowledgment.

After that, he should definitely say something.

Make a meaningful sentence, simple, to the point.

Like normal people. Like responsible, normal people who have no trouble controlling their emotions at all.

It takes him far too long.

“I'd like to show you someone.”

He opens the album, trying to stop his hands from shaking. And Fundy sits up, resting his chin on his shoulder.

It takes him a moment to find the right page. Definitely a long while.

And when he finally finds it, he takes a long moment to just stare at her.

That little girl with golden hair and dirty knees. Smiling and so full of life, more than Wilbur has even seen her be.

Fundy brings him back to reality with a loud snuffle.

“Who's this?” He asks, and maybe in any other situation, Wilbur would be a bit annoyed that his shirt was just used as a tissue.

But now, he only takes a deep breath.

He shifts a bit, resting his hand on his son's back, so that he can pull him closer to his side.

“That,” he says very softly, practically brushing his cheek over his red hair, “is your grandmother.”

Fundy's silent.

He is silent for a moment, staring at the photo with a weirdly neutral expression.

And with each passing second, something in Wilbur's chest tightens a little more.

And tighter, tighter, *tighter-*

“But she's small,” he finally says, frowning.

And with that one sentence, Wilbur bursts out laughing.

And something in him relaxes truly, for the first time in forever, as he takes a breath, feeling like it's going to be his first and the last one.

And he pulls his son close, until Fundy grunts. But Wilbur just hides his face in his hair; his arms tremble slightly.

“It's an old photo,” he explains.

And his voice is shaking so much, he might as well cry.

“Oh.” Fundy finally gives up the struggle, his cheek against his chest. “But grandmothers must be old. Or dead. I've seen it on TV.”

And Wilbur laughs again. But everything seems a bit more blurry now, and maybe he can no longer distinguish between crying and laughter.

“I'm afraid,” he says, strokes his son's hair, “that she's the second kind.”

“... Oh.”

Somewhere in between, the album fell on the ground with a crash that Wilbur didn't hear.

And when he pulls back slightly, he sees only Fundy, only his son.

And it feels good.

That he can look ahead without feeling the cold of her eyes.

“That's why you were sad?”

Fundy looks at him with big eyes, and Wilbur rests his hands on his cheeks, running his thumb over the freckles on them.

He takes another breath.

It makes him feel alive, just like the previous one.

He's not sure, if it should.

He's sure that he doesn't care.

“Yes,” he answers, honest this time. “But it's better now.:

And maybe, really, it is.

“Good.” Fundy smiles. “I don't like when you're sad.”

And Wilbur pulls him closer.

“You actually told him.”

It's more of a statement, than a question.

Wilbur leans against the kitchen counter.

“I did.”

Phil nods. He stands next to him, studies his face.

“How did it go?”

Wilbur's quiet for a moment.

And then he turns to face him.

And he smiles. Tired, but honest.

“He didn't care.”

“Oh.” Phil raises his eyebrows slightly; he rests one hand on Wilbur's back. “Well, that's good, isn't it?”

Wilbur pulls away the little curtain on the window, looking out at the setting sun.

This is one of those sunsets when the sun shades everything with a yellow glow, like the dying flames of a fire.

And looking at it, he thinks that maybe, this one time, at least for a moment, this can be *his* sunset.

“Yes,” he whispers. “I think so.”

“You were at Puffy's”, Techno says.

Wilbur freezes for a moment, thick hair curling between his fingers.

“Yeah,” he answers finally, going back to braiding them.

“Why?”

Somehow, it also became a part of their routine.

At first, Wilbur was a bit hesitant, timid, almost scared of making the wrong move when reaching for the hairbrush, on those nights when Techno returned home late at night, with more bruises and messy hair.

Until '*occasionally*', turned into 'often', finally became '*almost every day*'.

Wilbur didn't complain. It felt weirdly nice, doing something like this for another person.

Especially right now, when Techno's hair was still soft and smooth from the hairdresser.

“What are you, a cop?”

Techno smiles slightly.

“You're talking like father again.”

Wilbur just hums in response, pushing up more of his hair. He bites down a smile, when Techno doesn't even try to hide how he leans into the touch, tilting his head.

“You two spend way too much time together. But seriously, what were you doing there?”

The sun disappeared completely before Techno came home from his '*job*'.

And although this day was so impossibly, emotionally exhausting, Wilbur was still waiting for him, feeling like he could to run a marathon and pass out any moment at the same time.

And now, feeling a warm breeze on his face, the soft, distant sounds of owls and crickets, he doesn't regret not throwing himself on the bed and sleeping until winter after all.

Even if Techno asks very stupid questions.

“What, I can't visit people anymore?” Techno just rolls his eyes. “And how do you even know that?”

Even tho Techno raises his arms, he can't stop his ears from suddenly turning red.

Wilbur raises an eyebrow.

“I talked with Niki,” he says quietly. “We go to the same hairdresser.”

Wilbur feels the corners of his mouth lift.

“Seriously? I never knew you were a gossipmonger,” he laughs, and Techno turns abruptly.

His face's almost as pink as his hair, and Wilbur just laughs again.

“I’m not a *gossipmonger!*”

Wilbur leans down, cupping his face in his hands, lightly pressing his cheeks. Their noses almost touch.

“Yes you are, nosy little bitch,” He coos, in a voice usually reserved for Tommy only.

“Fuck off!” Techno pushes him back, face flushed. “Don’t touch me. Who knows what were you touching with those hands...”

He turns around, slouching down in the chair, arms crossed over his chest.

He gives Wilbur a quick scowl.

“You’re just gonna leave it like that?”

While Wilbur calms down enough to braid his hair again, Techno goes on to say:

“She asked if you were alright. Because you looked like you,” he raises his hands, making quotation marks with his fingers, “*were about to pass out!*”

Wilbur doesn’t answer immediately.

And suddenly, he realizes how strange this is.

That he’s braiding the hair of someone, he was so afraid of just a few months ago.

And he’s not even surprised by himself, grasping at every bit of warmth that someone can offer him.

More by Techno, ready to be so open with him.

And maybe because of that, he says:

“I needed advice.”

“Oh, yeah.” Techno sighs, with mock resentment. “I’m not enough for you anymore. I get it.”

Wilbur rolls his eyes, but the corners of his mouth twitch slightly.

“No, it’s just...” He pauses for a moment, taking a deep breath. Even though the sun is long gone past the horizon, he can still feel its warmth on his skin. “I told Fundy about my mom.”

Wilbur doesn’t need to see him to figure out the way he frowns.

“He didn’t know?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Techno shifts a bit in his chair. “But like, didn’t know about her? At all?”

“No,” Wilbur repeats, but his hands aren't shaking as much as he expected.

“You two didn't have... A good relationship?”

He feels how much Techno hesitates with the question. Testing the water, as if expecting it to burn instantly.

Perhaps expecting Wilbur to do it on purpose.

But Wilbur only swallows, hard, as he braids his hair.

“No,” he answers for the third time. “We didn't. For a long time.”

And while every word that comes out of his mouth tastes a bit like ash, burning his tongue, he realizes that, in a way, it also brings relief.

His mom loves him when he's five.

When he runs home, tears staining his face, blood on his knees.

As she looks at him, eyes wide and warm, quickly crouching beside him.

“Oh, Wilby...” She rubs his cheek with her thumb

Wilbur thinks his mom must have some kind of magical power.

Obviously she does. It's impossible for such a beautiful and wise and kind woman to not be even slightly magical.

And when she puts a bandage on his leg, she smiles at him.

“There you go,” she leans in, quickly kissing his knee. “There. Now it doesn't hurt anymore, does it?”

And yes, when she hugs him tight, her golden hair tickling his cheeks and nose, it doesn't hurt.

Wilbur knows his mom loves him when he's seven.

When she picks him up from school that day, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel of their old car. And she smiles at him, pulling him close, kissing his forehead.

“I was thinking,” she says, starting the engine, “that we could go on a little trip.”

Wilbur loves their little trips.

He loves to rest his hands on the glass, watching the trees, houses, and cars flicker behind them,

blurring together.

He loves when his mom turns on the radio, leaning back against the seat, and when she looks so calm, that even the dark spots under her eyes seem paler.

“When I’m big, I’m gonna have a van like this too!” He declares that day, biting into his hot dog.

And his mom just laughs, tucking his hair behind his ear.

Wilbur thinks his mom loves him when he's eleven.

When he stands in the entrance to their living room, shifting around on his feet.

“Mom,” he whines softly. “Come on...”

Though his mom looked a little less tired and a lot happier a few hours earlier, when she promised to help him with his homework, now she's leaning over the table, holding one of the many papers scattered around.

Wilbur doesn't know what's written in them, but whatever it is, it must be very nasty.

Because his mom's pale, her hand tight in her hair.

“Wilbur, I'm busy,” she only says, in a low voice.

And suddenly, she looks strangely small, her arms down, blinking quickly.

“But you promised!” He tries again.

And again.

And *again*.

And with each one, her jaw clenches a little tighter, like her hands on a piece of paper, until-

“Will you shut up already?!”

And suddenly, she doesn't seem small at all.

Suddenly, she seems scary, and Wilbur takes a step back. When she looks at him, eyes so sharp and burning, yet piercingly cold.

And just as quickly, her face changes again.

She looks almost as surprised as he is.

“I don't...” She takes a deep breath, closing her eyes.

And when she opens them, she's his mom once again and smiles in that familiar way.

“Let's go,” she says gently.

And when she sits with him at his desk, stroking his back with her hand, Wilbur almost forgets.

Almost.

Wilbur only starts to doubt it when he's thirteen.

When he stands in the living room, holding his guitar in his hand.

“Around seven, right?”

Wilbur nods, but the way his mom glances at her watch while biting down on her lip doesn't really soothe him.

“Are you sure you can made it? It's fine if-”

“Wilbur,” she interrupts him, smiling, even though it seems strangely forced. “I'll be there. Relax.”

She rests her hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly.

And she's not there.

Not when Wilbur nervously peeks out from behind the curtain, searching for her between the other folding chairs and adults.

Not when half of the children before him are already done, tired, but smiling.

Not when he goes on stage himself, and his fingers touch the strings (He closes his eyes).

Not when someone hands him a cheap plastic medal, shaking his hand.

Not when he sits on the sidewalk outside the school, staring at the sunset.

“I'm so sorry.” It's the first thing she says to him, when he finally sits down in the car, almost two hours later. “I had a lot to do at work and I couldn't even-”

“It's fine,” he interrupts her. “I know.”

She looks at him, maybe a bit surprised.

“Really?”

He nods, ignoring the way his throat tightens painfully.

“Oh.” She starts the engine, giving him one last look. “Okay.”

The plastic feels strangely heavy in his pocket.

She doesn't ask about it, when Wilbur hangs it on the side of his bed.

He's not even sure she noticed at all.

Wilbur thinks his mom might love him a little less when he's sixteen.

When he hugs his guitar in the living room again, much less hesitant and a lot more angry.

Because this time, he didn't come to ask for anything.

“No,” his mother says without even looking in his direction. “No way.”

His fingers tighten a little more.

“I wasn't asking for permission.”

She freezes for a moment.

And when she finally looks at him, her eyes are cold and dry, yet strangely absent.

She hasn't been wearing her earrings for a while now.

“Wil-”

“You haven't even seen me play!” He doesn't wait for her to finish. He knows what she'll say anyway. “I'm really good, I think I have a chance! Just-”

“Wilbur!”

He shuts his mouth when she raises her voice.

And suddenly, all the courage he gathered in the last few days disappears.

Wilbur's sixteen, but when he pulls his arms down, staring at the floor, he suddenly feels much younger.

It's quiet for a moment.

Until his mother sighs as she goes back to ironing.

“You can play under on the streets in your spare time. You need to have a normal job, Wilbur. Understand?”

Wilbur thinks he understands.

But at the same time, he doesn't.

“Okay,” he says then. “Sorry.”

He turns around, holding his guitar firmly.

When he was younger, his mother seemed to be able to just sense any time he felt like crying, even before Wilbur himself knew it. And she would come into his bedroom, sit beside his bed, letting him cry into her shoulder. And then he was still her little boy, and she looked at him with a smile, kissing the tip of his nose.

That day, he's alone in his room, even when he cries as loud as he can.

Wilbur's sure his mother hates him when he's eighteen.

When he stands in the hallway, his hands clenched, so tightly his nails dig painfully into his skin.

“Why didn't you tell me?!” His mother stops pacing around the room for a moment.

And her eyes are as cold as never before.

“Why were you messing with my phone?” He snaps back.

She frowns; her blond hair flowing in curls around her face.

“What else was I supposed to do?” She snorts, hands on hips; looks away. “You keep sneaking out, you don't even talk to me anymore-”

“I don't talk to you?” He laughs and it sounds bitter. “You didn't even ask me how my exams went.”

His mother takes a long breath, closing her eyes for a moment.

“Who is she?”

She doesn't scream anymore, but her voice is just as sharp.

“My girlfriend,” he replies.

Firmly, lifting his chin.

Challenging her.

And she just laughs.

“And I don't know anything about it?” But it sounds too casual. Diminishing.

Like it meant nothing.

“You didn't ask-” He stops when she raises her hand.

“No.”

Wilbur freezes.

He blinks and his hands relax slowly.

“What?” His voice is shaky.

“No,” she repeats, laughing, although there is no real happiness in it; tears appear in the corners of her eyes. “You're not gonna date anyone right now.”

His throat is so tight that he doesn't know if he would be able to say anything even if he tried.

“No, that's it,” she waves her arms. “You're too young for that, you have to focus on school and everything... And just *no!*”

Wilbur swallows.

“But why-”

“Because I said so!” She crosses her arms over her chest. “As long as you live under my roof. And if you don't like it, you can always leave. Go to the room.”

And she turns around.

Because for her, this conversation is clearly over.

For Wilbur, it's not.

“No,” he feels his hands tighten again painfully.

Mocking her.

She turns to face him again.

“No,” he repeats, his voice rising with each moment. “Not! This is my life, I have the right to decide about it! At least Sally cares about me! And you...”

He takes a deep breath.

His mother frowns as she stares at him. Her jaw tight.

“I don't know, I feel like you don't even love me anymore!”

His words don't even get a moment to settle in the air, for their weight to hang between them. They don't have time to hurt.

“Maybe I would love you more, if you stopped acting like an idiot!”

Wilbur's quiet again.

And then he turns away, disappearing into his room.

Before she can see his tears.

In a hurry, he tosses his clothes, things into his old backpack, pulls the guitar over his shoulder.

Before she realizes, she hit where it hurts.

When he goes back into the hallway, no one's there.

Nobody stops him as he walks out the door.

It's raining outside, heavy water soaking his hair and clothes, as he takes his phone out of his pocket.

“I have nowhere to go,” he whispers into it, swallowing a sob.

And he's alone.

He realizes that somewhere between all of this, he stopped braiding Techno's hair.

It curls loosely between his fingers.

His mouth is strangely dry.

“That night,” he says quietly, “after I called Sally. I was so angry, I just wanted to... I smashed my phone. On the sidewalk.”

Techno doesn't say anything.

He doesn't even move, like he's scared that the slightest sound would scare Wilbur off completely.

“I mean, the SIM card survived, and I bought a new one right away, but I still blame myself a little for that. I don't know if she didn't try to... Call me. Tell me to come home.”

Techno's silent for a long moment.

Wilbur isn't sure if he's waiting for him to finish, or just doesn't know what to say.

So ultimately, he's the one who speaks again.

“I used to think that...” He scowls, realizing that what he wanted to say would sound too untrue even in his mouth. “I mean, I was so mad at her at first. You know. Generally, for everything.”

Techno hums, clearly trying not to interrupt his train of thought.

And Wilbur's only grateful for this small sign, that he's still listening to him.

He tilts his head back a little, and Wilbur scoops up more of his hair.

Pink waves run through his fingers. If Techno cut them, they would probably curl even more.

“But then,” he says instead, “I thought I finally understood.”

“Understood why she was...?” Techno's voice is low, slow.

He doesn't look at him, but Wilbur doesn't need to see him to figure out the concern on his face.

“Yeah,” he replies. “Mom... She was very young when I was born.”

He pauses for a moment, trying to put the words in the right order.

Techno doesn't rush him.

He's just leaning back in his chair, letting Wilbur run his fingers through his hair a little mindlessly.

“I thought it must have been really hard for her. Alone, no decent job, no support... But then...”

He presses his lips tighter as he stares at his own hands.

The same hands that held his son for the first time, making only one promise.

Less of a promise really, more of a command to himself. And even if he never said it aloud, he still remembers it.

Staring at his reflection after the sleepless nights when he couldn't make Fundy stop crying. When his son broke something again, wanted to show something off again, when he needed more attention than he had the strength for.

And then, he would always grit his teeth, repeating the same words in his head.

'Do better.'

“Then Fundy was born. And I realized that wasn't a good excuse.”

Techno turns, finally looking at him.

And Wilbur's surprised to see that his eyes look strangely wet.

Wilbur's twenty-six and he knows his mother loved him.

Somehow, deep down, maybe he was always her son.

But Wilbur's also not stupid.

And maybe that's what hurts him the most.

That there was no reason. No *'big'* moment to start it all. Just the passing of years, and with it, the growing cold in her eyes.

Maybe that's the worst part.

That his mother wasn't a bad person. She wasn't an evil force, determined to destroy his life.

She just.

Didn't like him that much.

And no matter what he did, how long he tried to impress her, to please her, he couldn't change it.

But his mother is dead.

And now, when Techno pulls him close, letting him hide his face in his shoulder, maybe it doesn't matter that much.

Because his hair tickles his cheeks and nose, and there are more stars in the sky than he has ever seen before.

Just A Notion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

But maybe, he got too used to celebrating small victories too early.

Even tho Fundy is bursting with energy as much as usually the next day, jumping over the small stones on the path, holding his hand, laughing, playing around the beach with Ranboo, something changes the morning after that.

He's twisting his fingers, kicking his feet in the air at the breakfast table, seeming almost nervous.

“Hey, you alright?” Wilbur asks, watching his son.

“Sure,” Fundy answers, maybe a bit too quickly, leaning down to grab one of the buns on the table. It falls out of his hand and his voice shakes a bit. “Why wouldn't I be?”

He pushes the whole bun into his mouth at once.

Wilbur watches him for a moment, as the boy turns his head, chewing furiously, the tip of his nose turning almost as red as his hair.

And he sighs, as he takes another sip of his coffee.

“What did you do?” Techno sighs, getting a better grip on Tommy, who's currently trying to eat his own thumbs on his lap.

And even tho the tone of voice is clearly playful, Fundy looks like someone just slapped him in the face.

He turns pale as he stares at Techno with wide eyes.

“Nothing!” Even Phil glances his way, frowning. “Really. I didn't... Break anything.”

He shoves another bun in his mouth.

Techno exchanges a certain look with Wilbur.

It happens more and more often now. Where in that one brief moment, the movement of his eyebrows or pupils, Wilbur knows exactly what he's thinking.

(He's not quite sure what to make of that.)

“Are you feeling sick?” He puts his hand to Fundy's forehead.

It's warm, but seems like it has very little to do with a fever.

“Oh no. I feel very bad. I'll go lie down now. Bye.” And before Wilbur can say anything else, he hurries up the stairs.

They sit in silence for a while, almost frozen in their normal activities. The water in the kettle Phil put on has probably gone cold by now.

Until Tommy, clearly very unhappy with even one moment of silence and peace, holds out one hand, wrapping his fingers around a strand of Techno's hair.

“Ow!” He winces, pulling back, loosening the grabby fingers with his hand. “What was that about?”

And while he's still looking at Tommy, Wilbur knows he's not talking to him.

At first, he wants to shrug.

Until suddenly something hits him. He slowly sets his mug down on the table.

“I think, uhm.” He swallows. “I think he's upset... About my mother.”

Phil's face softens.

“Hey.” He walks over, resting a hand on his shoulder. “You did the right thing. He'll get over it soon.”

Wilbur wants to believe him.

He wants to believe his warm words, how his fingers tighten on his arm, reassuring.

But this time, it's a bit more difficult than before.

“You got a letter,” Techno suddenly says.

And the way he awkwardly tries to change the subject makes Wilbur almost laughs. But to some extent, he's still grateful for that.

Phil follows his gaze, looking down at the envelope on the kitchen counter.

“Oh.” He comes closer, and no one can miss that sparkle in his eyes, the easy smile on his face.

“It's from your girlfriend,” Techno adds, snorting as Phil's smile drops almost immediately.

“Not my girlfriend,” he murmurs. “I'm not a teenager.”

“So what? Your *Lady*-”

“Techno!”

And in a way, there's something endearing about the way his cheeks turn pink, his arms raised high.

Phil may not be a teenager anymore. With the first gray hairs, wrinkles around his eyes. Tired face, rough, scarred hands.

But he definitely loves like one.

“When will we meet her?” Wilbur asks, and he's only half joking.

“Preferably - never,” Phil hisses under his breath, shoving the letter into his pocket. “You'll make a fool out of me.”

His face softens into that familiar, warm expression, as he looks down.

He leans towards Tommy, smiling again.

“You can meet her, tho. You're not gonna embarrass me, are you?”

Tommy clearly agrees, laughing. Phil picks him up, holding gently in his arms.

“No, no, you're always good, aren't you?” He chirps, voice about three octaves higher, kissing Tommy on the tip of his nose. “Who's my little champion?”

Techno makes a face as he looks at them.

“I thought *I* was your little champion,” he mumbles, but loud enough for them to hear.

Phil doesn't look at him, hugging Tommy even closer.

“No, you're an old jerk,” he answers in an equally sweet tone. “Right, Tommy? Old fucking jerk.”

Wilbur laughs with him. Techno pretends he doesn't.

Though Wilbur would love to just trust Phil's promises that everything would work out, he finds it hard to ignore that constant ache in his chest.

Because Fundy spends the last few days almost exclusively avoiding them, fiddling with his fingers, looking like he was about to crawl out of his own skin.

Wilbur knows that all he needs right now is some space. Time to calmly let it all sink in, slowly adapt.

But that doesn't stop the simple fact, that Wilbur misses his son.

He missed when Fundy would look at him with a wide smile, not like a dog that just got caught biting a shoe.

But maybe this one, it actually feels fitting, seeing that he's standing on the kitchen chair, one hand deep in a drawer.

“What are you looking for?”

Fundy blushes, taking his hand back so quickly, that the chair wobbles dangerously.

Wilbur runs up, almost instinctively, grabbing him by the arms.

“Wow! Careful.” He sets him on the ground.

Fundy looks up from him, to Techno still standing in the kitchen's entrance. He puffs out his cheeks, drags his foot across the floor.

“... Glass.” He says quietly.

Wilbur stares at him for a moment. Blinks.

“Glasses?” He frowns, before it finally hits him. “Oh! Magnifying glass?”

“Yeah!” Fundy nods, clearly eager for something.

“Why do you need that?”

Fundy presses his lips together for a moment, looking away.

“Well...” He tightens his fingers on his shirt, pulling it down, until suddenly his eyes widen significantly, with a strange glow. “Because I’m a detective!”

“Father probably has one,” Techno says, leaning against the door frame, mindlessly playing with one ring on his finger. “You can go ask him.”

Fundy stares at his hands, any remaining color draining from his face.

“Yeah,” he stutters. “I’ll go ask!”

But before he runs up the stairs, Wilbur screams after him:

“I love you!”

Fundy stops suddenly, turning to face him again.

And he hesitates only for a moment.

He crashes into Wilbur's arms, hugging him tight around his waist, hiding his face in his sweater.

And Wilbur's not going to waste this moment.

Looking at his son, feeling that familiar warmth in his chest, Wilbur takes his face in his hands and kisses his freckled cheek.

And again.

Until Fundy breaks free from his grasp, sticking out his tongue, wincing, almost insulted.

“Dad, *stop*,” he whines as Wilbur laughs, plating a final kiss on top of his head before letting him go.

And when Fundy disappears up the stairs, Wilbur looks over at Techno and catches that warm, affectionate gaze for a second, before the man looks away, humming.

“So are we making this dinner or not?” He asks, pulling the loose strands of hair to the front, like he's trying to hide his reddened ears.

“And you,” Wilbur asks him that afternoon, mixing the salad for the third time, pretending to be busy, “wouldn't you like to have kids?”

Techno makes a face, but it softens a little the next moment.

“No,” he answers, turning the meat over in the pan. “These two are enough for me. Three, if we're counting my father.”

“You know what I mean.”

Techno stops, arms drooping slightly, before turning his head to look at him.

“No. No, I don't think I do.”

Wilbur doesn't quite trust the honesty in that.

“You know.” He shrugs. “Settle down... I'm not saying right now. Just, in general.” And Techno's quiet for a moment too long, so he quickly adds: “Sorry. I didn't mean to sound rude or anything, I was just wondering-”

“No,” Techno interrupts him. “I don't think I will ever have kids.”

For a moment there's this thoughtful look on his face, like this is the first time he's actually considering this to be an option.

He smiles a little faintly, shrugging.

“Huh.” Wilbur goes back to pretending to be busy, but Techno correctly senses that this isn't the end of that conversation, because he doesn't turn around yet. “Like, you just don't want kids or...? You know, if you wanted to, I'm sure I could set you up with someone. You're...”

He pauses for a second, looking up.

He never looked at Techno in that way before, not really.

His jaw is sharp, shoulders broad, and the dark spots under his eyes definitely give him a masculine, if not a bit tired expression. His bangs, long overgrown, falling out of the pin-up, flows along his cheeks in nice waves like a curtain.

But the scar across his nose, though old, still stands out against his face, drawing attention to it, and Wilbur can't decide if it's a bad, or a good thing.

“You're nice.” He settles on that, finally.

Techno laughs, short but weirdly honest.

“I think this is the last thing I would describe myself as,” he says, and maybe it's a bit hard to disagree. “But no. That's not the point.”

Wilbur tilts his head, in what sort of quiet question.

Techno looks at him for a second before looking away, like he just made a decision.

“I don't know.” He turns off the stove, taking the pan off it. “I guess I just never was very... Interested in that sort of thing.”

“Settling down?”

“With *someone*,” he corrects. “I don't even know. When we were in school, everyone was suddenly getting so worked up about... Everything. And Dream started going on all these dates, but I just... I tried a couple of times. But it was...”

“Awkward?” Wilbur proposes, and Techno holds out his hand flat, turning it in the air.

“Kind of. More like, I didn't know what they expected of me. Nothing really worked out, and it took me a while to realize, that maybe the whole 'I'm too busy for a relationship' thing, was always a bit of an excuse.”

Techno wipes his hands on a kitchen rag.

Wilbur turns around, sitting on the counter. The very tips of his feet still touch the ground.

“Oh,” he just says, having a hard time finding the right words.

“Right,” Techno agrees. “But don't worry, I am not crying myself to sleep because of that or anything. I guess...”

He pauses for just a moment, frowning.

“I guess I would just make myself unhappy, if I tried again,” he says hesitantly, like trying out the words for the first time.

And maybe they fit.

Wilbur nods slowly.

But suddenly, all the seriousness disappears from Techno's face, and a definitely malicious smirk appears.

“And you?”

“What about me?”

“You know what I mean,” he mocks, put a finger to his forehead, pushing hard.

Wilbur winces, and Techno laughs softly.

“I have a kid,” he just replies. “I think that pushes me a bit off the market for now.”

“Not really.” Techno shrugs. “Some people are into that, you know.”

Wilbur raises an eyebrow, feeling himself smile.

“I don't know,” he finally settles on that. “Maybe. One day.”

Techno turns around, starting to pull out the plates from one of the cupboards.

“Cool. You have us for now.”

Suddenly he stops, like his own words just hit him. He looks in his direction a bit hesitant, but with the same softness in his eyes.

Wilbur just smiles.

“Yeah,” he says, feeling that familiar warm somewhere in his chest. “I guess I do.”

“Do you think I'm a bad person?” Techno asks him that night.

Wilbur freezes for a moment. More startled the tone of his voice, hesitant and quiet, than by the question itself.

Eventually he turns his wrist, letting the long hair flow through the comb, parting it in two.

“I think you think too much, Techno,” he replies.

And even tho he can't see his face, he can imagine the man scowling, going by how he immediately hisses in pain.

“You sound like father again. And that's not what I mean, and you know it.” This time he sounds a bit more firm, turning the ring on his finger mindlessly.

“Not really,” Wilbur sighs heavy.

Techno looks like he wants to turn around, but gives up the idea when Wilbur twists another strand of his hair.

“Sometimes I just think... You know.” He makes a strange gesture with his hand. “Like what if... What if Fundy found out. What I do for living.”

Wilbur hums.

“I think he would think it's the coolest thing in the world.”

“Yeah. But I don't want him to think that,” he says quietly.

Wilbur lets his arms fall a bit. He frowns.

He lowers his hands, letting loose curls of hair fall over Techno's shoulders. He steps forward, so he can get a better look at Techno.

Techno, with his face bruised, still manages to turn even more red.

“I just...” He rubs his neck. “I don't know if this is really something... I want to do in the future.”

Wilbur looks at him for a moment. Then sighs, turning back to step behind the chair.

“Then stop doing it,” he says, picking up where he left off on the braids.

Techno snorts, like it offends and amuses him at the same time.

“Yeah, I'm already on my way. No, I can't do that to Dream.”

“I thought Dream was your friend.” He clenches his fingers tighter, pulls his hair a little more than necessary, as if trying to get all the stupid thoughts out of Techno's head. “Not your boss.”

“He's both” Techno winces, looking back at him.

“I think,” Wilbur says a moment later, finishing off the braid with a ribbon, “that you should talk to him about it.”

Techno, almost instinctively, reaches his hand back, running his finger over his hair.

“... I know,” he says in a low voice. “I've just been thinking a lot lately. So yeah...”

“Seriously?” Wilbur smirks at him. “That's something new.”

“Watch your mouth.” Even if Techno's trying to sound more threatening, his own smile gives him away. “I might be retiring, but I can still fuck you up.”

Wilbur just laughs.

Ties the ribbon one last time around the pink hair, allowing one braid to fall down the front of the Techno arm.

“There we go,” he steps back, sitting on the chair next to him.

Techno mindlessly reaches out, running his fingers over the braids from the back of his head.

There's a loud bang, somewhere behind him.

Like hitting metal against something solid.

They both turn around. It's hard to see anything in the dark, let alone from behind the corner of the house, but Wilbur squints his eyes anyway.

After a moment of long, deafening silence, Techno relaxes his shoulders, leaning back against his chair.

“That's nothing,” he reassures. “Probably just some stray dogs.”

Wilbur shifts a little nervously in his chair.

“You know,” he says, trying to sound casual, although his fingers grip a little tighter on the back of the chair, “I heard this house is haunted, so...”

Techno laughs so suddenly, that Wilbur flinches slightly.

“No, no,” he says, when he finally manages to calm down a bit. “There were never any ghosts here. We made it up.”

Wilbur frowns.

“*We*?”

“Well, me and Dream. When we were little.” He points to one of the neighboring houses, barely visible in the dark. “There used to be a lot of people coming here for the summer. And we were bored. So we... You know. We played with the lights, made some noise... And somehow it spread around.”

He shrugs.

Wilbur closes his eyes for a moment.

“But someone did die here. That's true.”

“*Lovely.*”

“What?” Techno laughs. “You're bitter you won't see any ghosts after? Although...” He pretends to think for a moment, twining one braid around his finger. “When you first came here, you did look a bit like a ghost. All pale, just wandering around the hallways, like a...”

He snaps his fingers.

“*Ghostbur.*”

'*Ghostbur*' sends him a rather unpleasant look.

“Yeah, very fucking funny,” he murmurs, and Techno just smiles.

“You look better now. At least you're not that pale anymore.”

“Yeah. Because I'm not dead,” he says firmly.

Techno's face turns serious, eyes slightly unfocused.

“How do you know?”

It's quiet for a moment.

Before Wilbur nudges Techno's shoulder, snorting loudly.

“Now you're acting like Phil.”

“You know what they say. Like a son, like a father. Or something.”

And before Wilbur can even correct him, there's a soft rustling noise.

Wilbur closes his mouth quickly.

And again.

Like feet moving on wet grass, light and a bit clumsy.

Wilbur looks up slowly at Techno.

His face is suddenly quite serious, as he sits still, clearly listening now.

“No, what the fuck was that,” Wilbur whispers, tucking his feet up onto the chair.

A chill runs down his neck as Techno stares back at him, equally anxious.

“Probably some dogs. I'll go check.” He slowly stands up.

Wilbur only nods, feeling his throat tighten.

“Oh wait.”

He quickly pulls his cell phone out of his pocket, shoving it into Techno's hand.

“Thanks,” Techno says quietly, turning on the flashlight. “If I don't come back,” he adds immediately, trying to sound lighthearted, “tell Dream he gets *nothing*.”

He turns, walking down the short stairs onto the wet grass; Wilbur watches his back.

Techno leans out, pausing for a moment before finally disappearing around the corner.

And the farther he goes, the quieter his footsteps become.

Getting slower.

And for a while it's just quiet, quiet, quiet-

“*Oi!*”

Wilbur almost jumps on his spot, feeling his heart beating twice as fast. He shivers.

“Fucking hell- Fuck, do you know how much you scared me? What are you even doing here?”

Techno's voice gets louder, closer, until Wilbur can finally see-

Familiar red hair.

“Fundy?!”

The boy shifts, very unsuccessfully trying to break free from the tight grip Techno has on his T-shirt.

“Hi, Dad...” It sounds more like a soft squeak.

Wilbur just sits there for a moment, taking it all in.

Before he falls heavy into his chair, exhaling slowly. He runs his hand over his face.

“Oh, fuck me...” He mumbles under his breath.

Techno, irritated by how Fundy leans down trying to break free from him, eventually grabs the boy, easily lifting him up under his arm.

Fundy lets out a squeal, his legs kicking furiously.

“Let me go!” He hits Techno on the chest with his very small fist. “Put me down, you *dick-*”

“Keep kicking like that, and I'll turn you upside down,” Fundy clearly takes the threat seriously, stopping another kick midway. “What are you even doing here?”

Techno puts him down finally, right next to Wilbur's chair.

Wilbur, calm enough for the fear turned into relief, to turn into anger again, looks at him, sharp.

“Yes, that's a very good question,” he says. “What are you doing here? Do you know what time it is? How did you even get here?”

Fundy nervously rubs his foot against the wooden floorboards.

“And barefoot, may I add,” remarks Techno.

“Well...” Fundy's hands tighten on his T-shirt, twisting it. “Through the back door...”

Wilbur takes a deep breath.

And another, closing my eyes for a moment.

Fundy, clearly feeling the lecture that was to come, quickly adds:

“I was just playing!”

Wilbur looks at him, clearly unfazed.

“Playing. In the garden. At midnight.”

Fundy nods eagerly.

“Well, I...” He looks to the side, like searching for something, before a strange twinkle flashes in his eyes. “I was pretending to be a spy.”

Wilbur raises his eyebrows.

“A spy?”

“Yeah!” He folds his hands behind his back, shifting his weight from the heels to the toes. “And spies work at night. And they are very quiet, and no one ever hears them.” Here he pauses for a moment, wincing. “But I don't think I'm a good spy. I'll stay with being a detective.”

“Fundy.” He leans down, resting his hands on his son's shoulders. “Honey. You can be whatever you want, but if you ever do something like that again, you won't leave the house until you're eighteen. Now, back home! Straight to bed!”

And Fundy doesn't need to be told twice.

Before he disappears completely behind the door, Wilbur yells after him”

“And don't even think about going out tomorrow! You're grounded!”

When his red hair flashes one last time at the stairs, Techno turns to him.

“You're too soft on him,” he says, sitting down in his seat.

Wilbur sighs softly.

“I know.” And as he stares into the darkness in front of him for a moment, somewhere in the back of his mind, he paints a cold image of his mother's eyes. “But I don't think I can do it any other way.”

Wilbur can't sleep.

Maybe it's because of the heavy drops of water hitting his window were recently joined by the first sounds of thunder, the approaching storm.

Maybe because Tommy had already woken him up two times this night, and was clearly getting ready for the third time.

Or maybe because his son has been avoiding him for the last three days, like even one look at him made him shiver. And even though he's only one room away, Wilbur misses him more than ever.

And all that's left for him to do, in all of these three situations, is to stare mindlessly at his own ceiling.

And when he finally concludes that maybe those few stains and cracks in the paint were never really that interesting, he sits up on somewhat numb elbows, wiping sleep from his eyelids.

He stretches out his hand towards the bedside lamp and flips the switch.

Nothing.

He curses under his breath.

Reaching for his phone lying on the nightstand, he looks one last time at Tommy.

Floorboard creaks softly under his feet as he goes out into the hallway.

Wilbur knows that snacking at night, especially in times of high stress, is a very unhealthy habit.

He knows. He just doesn't care.

But he freezes for a moment, slowly lowering the phone he planned to light his way with.

He blinks, rubbing his eyelids twice, but the soft light that flows from the kitchen into the hall and end of the stairs is definitely not just in his sleepy mind.

Slowly, quietly, he walks down the steps, feeling his heart beat a little faster against his ribs.

There are no ghosts in this house. Techno said they made it up. Wilbur trusts Techno. Definitely.

Even if someone *did* die here.

Of course, there aren't any ghosts in the kitchen.

But to say that it calms him down, would not be so much of an exaggeration; it would be a mere lie.

Phil's sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the raindrops slowly rolling across the window.

The candle on the table is casting some light on his hair, almost golden in its glow.

“Phil?”

His voice is almost a whisper, but Phil flinches violently, turning to face him. But when their eyes meet, his shoulders relax. His eyes seem hazy, distant, but there's something familiar and warm in them.

Wilbur wants to believe it's a good sign.

He's used to it, in a way. That sometimes he's woken up at night by someone screaming, that Phil sometimes gets lost in his own thoughts for a long time, staring somewhere in front of him with an absent gaze. That he sometimes finds him at absurdly late or early hours, wandering around the house aimlessly.

He's used to it. Which doesn't mean it's any less terrifying.

Wilbur thinks he will never forget the one time Phil, with a particularly absent-minded smile, patted him on the shoulder, calling him *'sergeant'*.

(For that one moment, there wasn't even a hint of recognition in his eyes.)

But now, though still clearly tense, Phil seems much more 'aware' than he usually does in similar situations.

“Oh. Wilbur.” He sighs softly, as he runs a hand through his hair. “You're awake.”

Wilbur nods.

“Do you want me to get Techno?” He asks softly.

After all, this one thing always stayed the same. The way Phil's face softened instantly at the sight of his son, like just his presence reminded him of his different life.

And by the way he smiled then, sometimes hiding his face in his shoulder, trying to discreetly wipe away the tears - a better life.

But now Phil only opens his eyes wider.

“No!” He says immediately, maybe a bit too loud; he lowers his voice. “No, you don't have to. I'm fine. Just...”

The sky outside the window flashes suddenly.

Like the whole house was shaken by thunder, echoing against the ground.

And Phil flinches, every muscle in his body tense. He stares at the floor for a moment, before looking up at Wilbur smiling, his face a little paler than a moment before.

“I don't like thunder,” he says quietly.

Oh.

Oh.

Wilbur opens his mouth, then closes it again.

He's not sure what to say. He is not sure what to do.

But before he can say anything, Phil adds quickly:

“But it's good. I'm better.” Strange smile appears on his face. “Last time...”

He reaches to his hair, cut short, uneven around his ear.

His smile quivers slightly, as another thunder wings out outside the window.

“It's nothing. I guess I prefer them short anyway,” he says quickly, laughing bitterly. “Everything's alright. I'm doing great.”

Phil doesn't look like he's doing great.

In fact, he looks a moment away from crying, fingers clutching on his pants.

Wilbur looks at him.

And after a moment of silence, he only says:

“I'll stay with you.”

Phil doesn't look like he's going to protest.

In fact, he looks too tired to protest anything. Certainly, not with Wilbur sitting in the chair next to him.

“You can't sleep?” He just asks, and Wilbur shrugs.

“Yeah,” he pauses for a moment, staring at the dim light from the candle.

And suddenly something in his chest tightens a little.

And maybe it's because he's tired. Maybe because Phil looks at him with familiar, warm eyes, though he's still impossibly pale, hands shaky.

Or maybe because he doesn't really know what else to do.

He leans to the side, resting his head on Phil's shoulder.

He tenses for a moment. Just a moment.

Then, almost mindlessly, he raises his hand, running his fingers through Wilbur's hair.

“I'm worried about Fundy,” he says honestly.

Phil hums softly.

“It's...” Wilbur looks down, at his hands resting on his knees. “He's acting weird. I know he probably just needs time and that he has a right to feel a little... *'Betrayed'*. But still.”

“It'll be fine,” Phil assures him quietly, hiding his face in his hair.

Wilbur is silent for a moment.

“Fundy's scared of thunder,” he suddenly remembers. “I should... I should check on him.”

Phil nods.

Wilbur doesn't move. Not for a moment, when Phil's rhythmic movements slowly bring out the remnants of sleepiness in him; he closes his eyes.

“I'll be back.”

And he lets Phil kiss the top of his head.

Tho his hands still shake slightly, Phil seems noticeably calmer than before. Wilbur wants to believe it's a good sign.

The stairs creak slightly under his bare feet.

He opens the bedroom door as quietly as possible.

“Fundy-”

And he freezes, his hand on the doorknob.

His bed is empty.

Rain falls on the floor through the open window.

ignore the ending

wow, look at all this fluff!!

c!Techno is aro ace I won't have it any other way.

You Owe Me One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Fundy was in his bed that night, when he was putting him to sleep.

When he kissed his forehead, pulling the covers tight under his ears, trying to enjoy those sleepy moments, when his son didn't look like just breathing was stressing him out.

Was.

Because now, his room is undeniably empty.

And all Wilbur can do is run his fingers mindlessly over the sheets. Still left in complete disarray.

Still warm.

Techno swears loudly, looking down, hands resting on the windowsill, leaning outside. The wind blows out his hair.

“There's a ladder,” he says. Then slaps his forehead with such force, that even Wilbur flinches.

“Ah. Fuck.”

Phil looks up, hand covering his mouth, knuckles so pale Wilbur won't be surprised if his fingers left marks on his face.

“Okay. Shit.” He shifts nervously from foot to foot, looks at Wilbur. Okay. “He couldn't... Get too far. Maybe he'll be back soon, maybe we should wait-”

“No.”

Wilbur doesn't recognize his own voice.

But strangely, he doesn't care at all.

He stands up, clenches his trembling hands; his nails dig into his skin.

“Are you insane?!” And he doesn't want to know what he looks like right now. He can guess from the way he's panting, how his heart beats in his chest, throat; chokes him. “What do you mean he's *'gonna be back soon'*? You think he came out by himself?”

Lightning outside the window lights up the room.

And for a moment, Wilbur can get a closer look at Phil's face. Pale, with dark spots under the eyes. Staring at him with an unreadable expression.

“No. No, you're right.” Phil's voice is suddenly strangely weak; he runs a hand through his hair. “I just...”

Wilbur curses.

He raises his hand, rests it against his jaw. His fingers tighten.

But no matter how hard, his thoughts can't focus on anything else.

Wilbur's not stupid.

He's not naive.

He's not stupid, and he heard enough horror stories in his life.

And no matter how much he doesn't want to, he can't stop thinking about them now. About Fundy, his little son in each of these little scenarios, each one darker than the next.

His knees almost buckle under his weight.

And that one thought, flowing through all of them over and over again.

That it might already be too late.

“Fuck...” His voice shakes, weak and quiet.

He jerks his hand down sharply, feeling the hot skin under his fingers.

And maybe if it stung a little more, maybe he could actually do something, instead of feeling his throat slowly tighten, the blood pounding in his ears-

“Wilbur.”

A hand tightens around his wrist, pushing it away from his neck, holding it in place.

Wilbur looks up at Techno.

“Let go,” he hisses, tugging at his hand hard.

Techno doesn't let go.

“Wilbur,” he repeats, clenching his fingers tighter as he tries to pull his hand out of his grip again. “Calm down.”

“Fuck off!” He raises his voice again. A shadow falls on Techno's face; eyebrows pulled together, lips pressed tightly. “Don't touch me.”

He reaches out with his other hand, his fingernails running over Techno's arm.

Techno holds down his other wrist.

And suddenly his face changes. If it was hard to read before, he can see the slip in very clearly now.

“For fucks sake, Wilbur!” He grips a little tighter, but not in a painful way, not yet. “Do you really want to do this right now?”

Wilbur gasps. His heart beats hard in his chest.

“My son is missing,” his voice cracks, like he's lacking air. Maybe he really is. “I won't just sit still and-”

“I know.” Techno cuts him off. “And you definitely won't help him by panicking.”

And suddenly, his grip feels strangely steadier. Grounding him to reality.

Because Techno is right.

Wilbur hates when he's right.

He breathes, letting his hands drop loose. Techno doesn't let go.

“Okay,” he whispers after a moment.

Slow.

Quiet.

Techno looks at him; raises an eyebrow.

“We have to go.”

And Techno nods.

And suddenly they fall into a strange rhythm.

The candle in the kitchen casts a bit of light into the hallway as he quickly throws on pants and his shoes.

Someone pulls a raincoat over his shoulders, adjusting the hood over his head. Wilbur turns to look at Phil, who just smiles faintly.

And before any of them can say anything, there's a familiar noise from upstairs.

It makes something in Wilbur's stomach tighten painfully.

Crying.

“Tommy.”

Tommy.

Before they can even fully process the thought, Phil glances between him and Techno.

“I'll stay,” he says.

Techno looks at him.

And for one moment, hesitation flashes across his face.

But he immediately furrows his eyebrows, nodding.

“Okay. All right. Call me if...” He swallows. “If anything happens.”

When Fundy was four, his favorite thing in the whole world was playing hide-and-seek.

And it wouldn't be that unusual, if not for the fact that Fundy was absolutely terrible in hide-and-

seek, even for a four-year-old.

Maybe because he always chose the same hiding places. Maybe because he couldn't hold back a giggle whenever Wilbur was around. Maybe because his eyesight seemed to suddenly worsen by a lot when it was time to search.

To Wilbur, it didn't really matter.

Even if he had to try his best to go easy on him, the smile on Fundy's face was always worth it.

And now, with a flashlight in a shaky hand, Wilbur very much wishes it would be the same.

That it would be just a game. That he would have to pretend that he didn't spot him a few seconds after opening his eyes. So that at the end, he could pull his son into his arms, safe and happy.

Wilbur would give up a lot to be able to hug his son again.

Their clothes soak up water almost instantly. Techno's hair, wet, clings to his neck and face as the wind blows his hood off his head.

Fundy's not in the garden. There are only chairs they forgot to hide from the rain, and a ladder, from the ground to a window. Wilbur stares at it a moment too long.

“Come on.” Techno puts his arm around him, pulls him forward.

Fundy's not on the road they walked so many times on their way to the beach.

And Wilbur's pretty sure he can still see his footprints in the ground (he knows it's not real; fresh mud spreads under his shoes).

Fundy's not on the beach.

Wilbur's trying very hard to breathe.

The sun's already slowly rising, painting the sky slightly orange.

And although the rain falls in cold drops on their hands, their faces, over time, the thunder fades away, passing.

“Fundy!” Wilbur shines his flashlight once more on the dark, seawater reflecting it.

He tries to not think about the worst.

Techno's right.

He can't afford to panic right now.

A hand tightens on his shoulder. Techno's face is pale, stressed; jaw clenched.

“Come on. He's not here.”

Wilbur looks away once more. Water's reflecting the first rays of the sun.

He swallows.

“Maybe,” Techno suddenly adds, “someone from the village saw him. We should...”

He doesn't finish, but Wilbur nods.

When he looks back at Techno, he realizes how cold it really is.

And suddenly he reaches, pulling him close, hiding his face in his chest. Techno just rests his hands on his back.

Cold rain is falling down his neck.

Moments later, clutching the wet flashlight in his hand, Wilbur tries his best to not cry.

He doesn't know if it's out of frustration, worry, fear, or everything else. He keeps his eyes on Techno's shoes, covered in mud.

He barely realizes where they're going. Even as they turn to a familiar path, pass buildings that he walked by a few days earlier.

And it hit him only when they're standing in front of the door.

Techno raises his hand, knocking (tho, '*bangin*g', seems to be a much more accurate word).

He doesn't pull back his hand, but suddenly he freezes.

Because Puffy opens the door almost immediately.

In a nightgown, hair wet, but definitely, completely awake.

“Oh! Thank god, you're here.”

There's a sort of relief on her face, as she rests her hand on her chest.

Wilbur looks at Techno, who seems as thrown off as he is.

“I saw him from the window. You know, he stands out with those...” She twists her hand around her hair. “I was gonna call, but the power's out, in the whole neighborhood I guess, goddamn it. Niki told me to buy a cell phone, but no... Fuck.”

He walks back into her house, lit up by candles, putting her hands to her cheeks.

Wilbur, has no idea what he's talking about.

Until he opens the door a little wider

Because then, everything suddenly stops.

Fundy, soaked to the bone, face as red as his hair, but surely *safe*, sits in a chair.

Warm tea in his hands; drops of water fall from his hair onto the towel thrown over his shoulders.

Fundy.

Fundy.

Wilbur's still stuck in place when Techno runs into the house. When he grabs Fundy, right into his arms, holding him close.

“Holy shit, Fundy!” He laughs, a bit like he's crying, a bit relieved.

Fundy, maybe a bit confused, wraps his arms around his neck, hiding his face in his wet hair.

“I saw seals!” He laughs.

Something cold runs down Wilbur's neck.

And only then, he's brought back to reality.

Puffy closes the door behind him.

“Fundy,” he breathes quietly.

His heart is pounding in his ears.

And his son smiles.

“Dad!”

Techno leans down, putting him to the ground, and Wilbur drops to his knees, spreading his arms wide.

And when Fundy falls into his arms, Wilbur's not sure if he'll ever let him go.

He doesn't let him go when they're out in the rain again.

He puts his own jacket over his Fundy's arms, pulling the hood over his eyes, letting him hide his face in his shoulder.

And he squeezes Puffy's hand once more, feeling almost numb with overwhelming relief. Puffy just smiles as he tells them to say hi to Phil.

On the way back, Fundy just wraps his arms around Wilbur. For a second, he's almost sure he fell asleep.

He didn't.

Definitely not when Wilbur finally (reluctantly) sets him down on in the hallway. Instead, he's certainly embarrassed, nervously shifting his feet on the floor, clenching his fingers on the edge of his sweatshirt.

(Sweatshirt.

He didn't even take his jacket.)

And rightly so, Wilbur thinks.

Because as Phil hurries down the stairs, ignoring how one knee bends significantly under his weight, pulling the boy towards him, the tension slowly drifts off Wilbur's shoulders.

Phil picks up Fundy, holding him tight, close, and the boy leans forward slightly, whispering something in his ear. Something Wilbur can't hear, but something that makes Phil stop for a moment, before a strange, soft smile appears on his face.

But it's only a few minutes later, when he sets Fundy, already in dry pajamas, down on the couch in the living room, taking a deep breath, that he fully realizes.

How pissed off he is.

“Do you even realize,” he starts, trying to sound as calm as he can, “how much you scared us?”

Apparently it's not working as well as he hoped, because Fundy falls heavier on the couch, like he's trying to disappear entirely.

“I thought something happened, that someone...” He closes his eyes for a moment, clenching his fingers on his own arms. “What were you even thinking?”

Phil, standing beside him, rests a hand on his shoulder. And tho he doesn't say anything, he looks at Fundy with a look so sharp and cold, that Wilbur himself feels a little uneasy.

Techno, sitting next to Fundy, doesn't even seem to register their conversation at all, mindlessly stroking the boy's wet hair, like he has to make sure he's still there.

Fundy opens his mouth, but Wilbur cuts him off, nervously walking from one end of the room to the other.

“Sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night during a thunderstorm? Sure, why not!” He freezes, as something hits him. “That ladder. That's when...” He hides his face in his hands, feeling how much they are shaking. “Is that what you were doing earlier?”

Fundy doesn't answer.

The way he looks away, shifting slightly more towards Techno, answers for him.

“Fuck.”

Wilbur runs a hand through his wet hair. Small, cold drops fall on his shoulders.

Fundy straightens, pressing his lips together, with a sudden surge of confidence.

“Because...!” All courage disappears with one look from Phil. He raises his arms higher, staring at the floor. He finishes the sentence so quietly, Wilbur can barely hear it. “I lost the ring.”

Wilbur stops pacing around the room.

He looks at Phil, who seems just as confused.

“What?” Wilbur feels his hands relax slightly.

Fundy turns even redder.

He's going to be sick.

Wilbur can already feel it, with how flushed his face is.

Fundy's eyes look a lot wetter than they did before. He sniffs, loud.

“I lost my ring!” He repeats, sounding very close to crying. He turns to look at Techno. “On the beach. I didn't mean to, really! But it must have fallen out of my pocket somehow, and then I couldn't find it anymore and... And I'm *sorry!*”

The last word comes out, along with a loud sob.

And he literally falls into Techno's arms, hiding his face in his T-shirt.

For a while, neither of them says anything.

Wilbur looks from his son to Phil, like he's expecting some answer that neither of them is clearly able to give, for two very different reasons.

Techno awkwardly strokes Fundy's back, frowning.

And suddenly, something seems to hit him when he looks down at his hand. At one, strangely empty finger.

“My ring... God, *Fundy*.”

Wilbur stares at his hand.

And really, all he can do is laugh. He covers his face in his hands.

“I'm sorry,” the boy mumbles, muffled by the fabric of the shirt, between one sob and another. “I didn't mean to...”

“That's why you were acting so strange?” Techno looks down, at the ball of wet, red hair and unhappiness. “You were scared to tell us?”

Fundy nods.

“I wanted...” He sniffs. “I even took a magnifying glass to make it easier to look! But that didn't help much... I didn't want to look when you were on the beach because... Ow.”

Techno looks at Wilbur.

Wilbur looks at Techno.

“Fundy,” Techno speaks softly, more softly than Wilbur thought he could, still a bit pale. “I wouldn't be angry, not really. I didn't even care about that ring.”

The boy stiffens for a moment. He winces, wrinkling his nose.

“That's worse. All that for nothing.”

Techno laughs, pulling him closer.

Fundy falls asleep like that.

With his cheek resting on Techno's chest, Wilbur's hand on his back.

“You're okay?” Phil asks softly.

Wilbur closes his eyes for a moment.

And as he looks at Phil, he feels his lip tremble involuntarily.

Fundy looks so tiny in Techno's arms when he carries him upstairs, carefully avoiding every creaky step.

Wilbur watches his hands, as he lays the boy on his bed.

He crouches down, gently brushing his hair away from his burning face.

He's going to be sick.

He feels his hands clench.

Techno rests a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey. It's okay.”

Wilbur really wants to believe him.

But when he looks up at his own reflection in the mirror, he can still see red marks on his neck.

Chapter End Notes

these last chapters are gonna be a lot shorter, that's just about pacing! :)

No Doubt About It

Chapter Notes

NEW ABBA ALBUM REJOICE

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next day, the weather clearly takes on a more summer approach, with rays of sun on wet grass.

If he looks at the right angle, the cobwebs above his head appear almost dazzling, reflecting the light like jewels. One of the small things, ones that you only see when you look for them.

Wilbur wasn't actually looking for them.

But it's hard to name the process of mindlessly resting his head against an old tree trunk (still leaving wet stains on his shirt) anything else.

The book, open to a random page, lies in his lap; more as a sensible excuse than something that would actually occupy his mind. He hasn't touched it in a week.

(He hates when his favorite characters die)

He could fall asleep like this.

Or at least, he's tired enough for that.

When he finally gave up staring blankly at the wall, he spent the rest of the night (or rather early morning), at the edge of Fundy's bed. Like he was going to disappear again, as soon as he looked away.

And when Techno finally managed to squeeze a cup of coffee into his hand, all he heard was: *'Go get some fresh air'*.

He's not sure how much good it would do for him *physically*, seeing that his throat still stung a bit, whether from yesterday's cold or exhaustion, and when he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, the dark spots on his pale face were already there, more like bruises.

Maybe he could actually fall asleep here.

Watching the window to Fundy's room out of the corner of his eye.

And maybe it would be nice just to stop thinking for a while. To dive into that dullness that circulates somewhere in the back of his head.

Maybe it would be nice to let those stupid, silent thoughts finally end, and feel the full weight of them.

Like the one that he could fall asleep right here right now, blanket tucked under his feet, the tree trunk rubbing roughly against the back of his head, and the warm rays of the sun falling on his skin.

(And that maybe it would be nice to stay that way forever.)

But apparently, it wasn't meant for him.

No drowning himself in his own pain and sorrow, or even a moment of peaceful sleep.

He opens his eyes, turning his head towards the sliding door to the garden. He's not sure if he was expecting Techno, with a slightly awkward look on his face, or Phil, with the usual worry and warmth in his eyes.

But it is not any of them.

Niki looks up at him, and even from this distance, Wilbur can see the profound disappointment on her face.

“Oh. Hi,” he greets her, maybe a bit too tired to be this surprised.

“I have been told,” she announces, standing over him and looking down, “that you're being dramatic again.”

Wilbur closes his eyes for a moment, sighs deeply.

“I'm not *dramatic*,” he mumbles, feeling his cheeks suddenly turn a little pinker.

“You are,” she says, like it's an undeniable fact. And anyone who tries to argue that two plus two isn't four, should be called an idiot. “Techno told me. But I can see it now.”

Wilbur wrinkles his nose.

(Nevertheless, he picked up that habit very quickly.)

“Fucking snitch.” He lets his head fall against the trunk again, closing his eyes. “I can do what I want. And I think I get a free pass this time.”

And when he opens his eyes again, Niki's still staring at him; pink hair falling down her face from beneath her dark beanie, flowing over her decidedly disgusted face.

“Uhm. Move.” She leans down, wrapping her fingers around his wrist.

And for someone a head shorter than him, she's surprisingly strong.

Instinctively, Wilbur grasps a tree trunk with his other hand, pushing his legs against the ground.

“Where?”

“We're going on a trip!”

And her face flashes the most malicious, wicked smile Wilbur has ever seen.

“Oh no.” He tugs at her hand, ripping it out of her grip. “No way.”

Niki purses her lips, rests her hands on her hips.

And before Wilbur can say anything else, she quickly wraps her hands around his leg, pulling him down on the grass.

Wilbur screams, definitely to the delight of this new, slightly more psychopathic side of Niki.

“Leave me alone,” he whines, throwing his arm over his face, stretched flat on the grass, one leg still in the air. “I want to stay here. Let the earth devour me.”

He spreads his hands to both sides, putting the book to the side.

“Life's not worth it. It was never meant to be. Time to go back to being moss or something.”

Niki, clearly not interested in this performance, just looks at him, eyebrow raised.

“Wow. Worse than I thought.”

They say you never forget how to ride a bike.

And maybe, he didn't forget how to ride. But how to not fall over on the first rock - definitely.

Not that Niki seems to care. She almost looks like she's having a bit too much fun, watching him brush the sand off his pants.

“It's the saddle,” he mutters under his breath, feeling the tips of the ears start to burn a little.

And while really, Phil's bike is definitely suited to someone much shorter than him, even Wilbur isn't entirely convinced of this excuse.

Niki definitely isn't.

Because she just turns her head, squinting.

But if there's one good thing that has come out of this whole circus, it's that it actually distracted his thoughts from these sluggish, dark, and somewhat dramatic parts.

But at what cost.

Niki pulls him into the wildest part of the nearby woods, laughing each time his fingers tighten on the handlebars a little more.

She looks at him, seeming very pleased with herself.

“When was the last time you rode your bike?” Asking, as if the way he tenses up when he runs over a small rock was not already an answer

“Yesterday. I train every day,” he snaps back.

Niki chuckles softly, letting go of her own handlebars, leaning back.

She smirks.

Wilbur wants to twist a part of her skirt into the chain of her bike.

Over time, the ground under their wheels slowly changes more and more stable, the trees thicken significantly, the green becomes more intense.

And when he tilts his head back, gazing for a moment into the traces of blue between the leaves,

perhaps for a moment, with the wind blowing his hair back, it even seems quite reassuring.

Until it runs over the next root.

When Niki finally stops, it takes him a moment to catch his breath.

“Like I said,” she watches his face, hidden in his arms. “You have your casket ready?”

Wilbur sends her a deadly look, but when he looks up, the corner of his eye catches where they are.

A small clearing, littered with dandelions and daisies, and Wilbur straightens slightly, frowning.

“Oh.”

Niki hops off the bike, waiting for him to (with much less grace) do the same.

The grass's bending under the wheels of their bikes, reaching just above the ankles, and Niki looks up at him with a raised eyebrow.

“What do you think?”

She shrugs off her sweatshirt off her shoulders, laying it on the ground, sitting down over it. Wilbur leans his bike against the grass, straightening.

“It's nice. I think”

The sun casts warm rays on his skin; he squints his eyes, cocking his head.

There aren't any clouds in the sky.

A bit ironic, thinking about yesterday.

“Hey.” Niki shifts a bit, patting the spot next to her on the grass. “Don't just stand there.”

The grass's still a bit damp on his skin, shirt. Wilbur doesn't care any more than he did an hour ago.

He covers his face with his hand, taking a deep breath.

“I know, by the way,” Niki suddenly says.

Wilbur doesn't look at her. He doesn't even sit up, just twists his head a little.

The grass tickles his cheek.

“About what?”

“About what happened. You know, yesterday.”

Wilbur hums.

“I guess the whole village knows.”

Niki turns to face away, blushing slightly.

“Well... Kind of.” She leans down, turning some grass mindlessly in her hands. “But I just wanted to tell you, that it wasn't your fault.”

Wilbur holds his breath.

Niki looks at him, like he just put on an extremely predictable finale of a rather disappointing show.

“Ah. I felt like you were thinking that.”

Wilbur purses his lips.

And they're silent for a moment.

“Just,” he says, as the words settle like heavy soot on his tongue. “I think maybe recently... Maybe I wasn't paying him enough attention, I didn't notice that something was wrong. I mean, I noticed, but...”

He squeezes his eyes shut, as he rubs the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

And while it may be a bit of a relief, it doesn't make the way it burns his throat any less painful. He takes a deep breath, like choking on hot smoke.

“I don't know. I should have been more careful.”

Niki doesn't answer immediately.

She just, as if not bothered to put her hand straight into the hot coal, rests her hand on his shoulder.

“You're a good father, Wilbur.”

He frowns, snorts, turning his head the other way.

But still, he can't bring himself to shake off her hand. Her fingers tighten on his shoulder.

“I'm serious,” she says, like she really believed it, like there was no room for discussion. “Kids do stupid things sometimes and that's nobody's fault. Hey.” She pulls on his arm. “Look at me.”

Wilbur doesn't want to look at her.

Because he suddenly realizes that the world around him is blurring and he has to bite on his lip to stop it from trembling.

He tries very hard not to sniff.

He finally squeezes his eyes shut tightly, before turning to face her.

“Fundy really loves you, Wilbur,” she says, and looks as confident as only young, confident girls can be.

“I know,” he says quietly, trying very hard to stop his voice from breaking. “But... I think I loved my mom too.”

Niki frowns.

“I... I don't think I understand.” She smiles softly.

“I know you don't. Sorry, I just...” He presses his hands against his eyelids, feeling that familiar tightness in his throat. He laughs bitterly. “I don't know why I'm crying again.”

Niki leans forward, she twists one dandelion between her fingers for a moment before reaching for another.

“If it helps, I can cry with you.”

Wilbur laughs again, more sincerely this time.

“I don't want you to cry.”

“I don't want you to cry either,” she says, sitting down cross-legged. More flowers fall on her lap. “But maybe you just need to finally let it out.”

Wilbur's not sure if she's really right.

But when he lowers his hands, he feels that it doesn't really matter at the moment. It's too hard to hold back the tears flowing down his cheeks.

“Fuck,” he says, something between laugh and sigh.

“I also cried in front of someone recently.” She smiles, leaning over her knees. With delicate fingers, she twists the flowers. “If that makes you feel better,”

Wilbur sniffs.

“Why?” He manages to squeeze between one sob and another.

Niki's face turns serious for a moment, her hands frozen in motion. He frowns a little.

“I worry about Ranboo sometimes. He's gonna go to school soon...”

“Is that bad?”

Niki takes a deep breath. And while his eyesight is still blurry, it's perhaps the first time he sees genuine worry on her face.

“He's a smart boy, really,” she says calmly, but Wilbur can hear the uncertainty in it. “So nice, but I'm scared that... That the other kids won't be.”

Wilbur's thoughts flash back to Ranboo, for a moment. To the shy boy at his son's birthday party, hiding behind his sister's skirt.

“He'll be fine.” And maybe he's a bit surprised himself, at how confident he sounds. “If he's anything like you.”

Niki looks at him, and despite the cold breeze that ruffles her hair, her smile is warm.

“I know. Well,” she looks away, “and now he'll always have Fundy, too.”

Wilbur frowns.

“No, we're only here for the summer.”

Niki bites her lip. Wilbur notices she's trying to hold back a smile.

“Ah, yes,” she agrees, but there's a strange sparkle in her eyes. “Of course.”

Wilbur wrinkles his nose.

But when a moment later, listening to the soft noise of the forest, watching the slow movements of Niki's hands, he closes his eyes for a moment, he realizes that the thought of it doesn't seem so terrifying anymore.

Staying.

He wakes up some time later. He wrinkles his nose, stretching like a particularly long cat.

Niki looks at him from her phone.

“Oh, you're awake,” she notes with a smile.

Wilbur groans.

“You should have woken me up. I didn't mean to fall asleep.”

“Nah. You looked like you needed it.”

She leans in, reaching for something on her lap.

“Come here,” she waves her hand, urging him closer.

Her beanie, now adorned with a tiny flower crown, lands on his head.

Instinctively he reaches to his hair, dark fabric and delicate flakes.

“Oh.”

“Like a proper crown,” she says, observing her handiwork with obvious satisfaction. “If you want, I can teach you.”

Later that day, with three unsuccessful and one slightly less hideous flower crown slung over his arm, Wilbur finally leans his bike against a familiar fence.

When he turns, he spots Phil in the window, leaning over the kitchen counter. He looks up, smiles at him.

Wilbur raises a hand.

“Oh. I should give this back.” He reaches for the beanie still on his head, but Niki only waves her hand.

“You can keep it,” she says, already getting on her bike. “Suits you.”

Techno looks up at him with a raised eyebrow, as he walks inside.

“What happened?”

Wilbur looks down at his wet T-shirt, his grass-stained pants; ruffled hair, red eyes.

“Nothing.”

And he smiles, more to himself.

He only hears light steps down the stairs before Fundy literally crushes into his arms.

“Wow!” He laughs, leans down, picking him up. “A little warning next time.”

He spins in place, and Fundy yelps, hiding his face in his shoulder and wrapping his legs tighter around him.

“Sorry I made you sad,” he says suddenly.

Wilbur frowns. Fundy sniffs.

He leans back slightly, so he can look at him better, but Fundy just presses his face further against his shoulder. Wilbur looks questioningly at Techno, who just shrugs.

“Father told him off.”

“I didn't tell anyone *off*.” Phil walks from the kitchen, with a trace of flour on his cheek and dark bags under his eyes. “We just had a little chat.”

“Yeah. You're really good at the whole *'I'm not mad, I'm just disappointed'* thing.” Techno rolls his eyes.

Wilbur tosses Fundy lightly in his arms.

“Come on, now,” she says quietly, stroking his back with her hand.

Fundy turns his head, leaning his cheek against his shoulder. He puts his chin up slightly.

“I like your crown.”

Wilbur laughs softly.

“Thank you. If you want, I can teach you how to do it.”

“Really?” Fundy's eyes open a little wider, with a sudden gleam.

“Uhm. But not today. I'm still mad at you, and you're still grounded.”

Fundy purses his lips. Wilbur squeezes his cheek between his fingers.

“Wilbur.”

Wilbur doesn't open his eyes.

“Wilbur.”

Wilbur doesn't answer.

“Wilbur!”

Wilbur flinches suddenly, as a heavy hand nudges his shoulder.

In the dark, it's hard to tell who's kneeling by his bed, pulling one of his arms.

Maybe if he actually opened his eyes, it would help.

He decides that whatever it's, they're not worth it. He grunts, hiding his nose deeper into the sheets.

“Wilbur, wake up.”

Now, as the heavy fog of sleep starts to lift, he recognizes Techno's voice; fingers covered in rings still holding onto his shirt.

Wilbur presses his face harder into his pillow.

The room is hot, sweat gathering between his thighs and knees. He closed the bedroom window before he even got to bed.

(He's been doing that a lot, lately.)

“I'm gonna tell Dream.”

Wilbur stops mid-yawn. He slowly opens his eyes.

Techno, in an old, washed out shirt, sits beside his bed, resting his arms on the mattress. One part of his hair flows in waves down the shoulders, the other still tucked into a braid.

Wilbur blinks, prompting his head on his arm.

“You'll wake up Tommy,” he mumbles, and Techno actually turns his head towards the cradle, almost nervous.

“Sorry.”

Wilbur's not sure if it's aimed more at him, or the sleeping baby, but he just shakes his head.

“What was that about Dream?” Sleep still lingers over his eyes.

“I'll tell Dream. That I don't wanna do boxing anymore.”

Wilbur drops his hand.

He feels like he should say something right now. That it's an important moment, which, if it wasn't the middle of the night, and his pillow still didn't seem so inviting, maybe would spark some more emotions in him.

He's too tired for his.

“Oh. That's good,” he says slowly. His head falls heavy against the pillow. *“I'm proud of you. But couldn't this wait until morning?”*

Techno bites his lips.

“I didn't want to wake up father,” he mumbles softly. *“He needs some rest.”*

Wilbur can agree with that.

Not with the decision to wake him up in the middle of the night. But the fact that Phil seemed strangely weaker and more exhausted every day.

Wilbur wants to believe it will pass.

Techno looks away. He touches one finger, like to turn a ring that's long gone.

Wilbur takes a deep breath, sinking a little deeper into his sheets.

“And I can't sleep.” He says it so quietly that Wilbur almost misses it.

Techno doesn't look at him, turning his head to Tommy's cradle.

Wilbur hums softly.

“Do you want me to stay with you?”

They've been in this place before. In another room, and Techno surely wasn't looking at him with so much confusion.

But still.

And Wilbur still remembers perfectly well how insecure, how small he felt back then. How strange everything around him used to feel.

Wilbur then, would never shift back on the bed, making room for the Techno.

Now, it comes so easy, he barely realizes what he's doing.

“But I might pass out,” he warns jokingly. “Sorry.”

Techno watches him for a moment before finally getting up to sit on the mattress.

And maybe it's kind of funny. How they keep repeating themselves.

They don't say much after that.

Techno keeps pulling the covers off him all night.

In the morning, Wilbur wakes up to pink hair tickling his face. And although Techno ears a kick to the shin for it (but by looking at how he only wraps himself tighter in the sheets, Wilbur's not even sure if he felt anything), he still feels himself smiling on his way to the bathroom.

Chapter End Notes

Wow look at all this fluff! I sure hope nothing bad will happen soon :)

Little Things

Chapter Notes

:)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

And somewhere in between, between all the hot air, the warm sun on his face, the icy rain on his neck, summer passes by.

Wilbur stares at the last days of August, at the numbers on his calendar that don't seem to shrink at all, and wonders how long he'll be able to ignore it.

The last days of summer smell like weak melancholy. Freshly cut grass, thick fog, sea breeze.

They reflect on his skin in the sun, like a gentle breeze, like tiny drops of rain.

And Wilbur lets himself get lost in them.

He lets himself ignore that one question ringing in the back of his head, let it get lost among a million others.

(What now?)

He lets himself pretend. For as long as the calendar on the kitchen wall shows August, for as long as he can.

It's quiet outside.

When he takes a deep breath, as the wind ruffles his hair lightly. When his arms relax, and he can almost feel them sink into the grass, tickling his hands, his face.

It's calm, even when's somewhat brutally pulled out of it, by a slap of a small hand.

He opens one eye and Fundy leans over him, so low they almost touch noses.

"I'm bored," he declares.

Wilbur hums softly.

"Awesome. I'm not."

He closes his eyes again, more out of spite than with the real hope that it will last. And sure enough, he's nudged again, this time dangerously close to his eye.

"Play with me."

"Techno can play with you."

Techno, currently busy stopping Tommy from putting a handful of dirt into his mouth, turns to face them.

“Oh no, I'm busy. And he's not my kid, take care of him yourself.”

Then, in a very loving way, he pulls another, also very much not his, kid into his arms.

“Go to Phil,” he says, already sitting up and saying goodbye to a very pleasant vision of a nap.

Fundy shakes his head.

“He's sleeping. And Techno said that if I wake him up, he'll skin me alive.”

“Yeah.” Techno wrinkles his nose. “I also told you to not repeat that to your father.”

Wilbur doesn't let the thought that Phil seemed particularly tired today, the way his hands shook more than usual, stay in his head for a long time.

The sun warms his skin.

“I can teach you how to make flower crowns,” he says, the first thing that comes to his mind when his gaze lands on small flowers, overgrowing the grass. “Niki showed me how to make them.”

Fundy smiles wide.

A moment later, a pile of flowers lands on Wilbur's lap, carefully selected by their six-year-old self proclaimed expert.

Fundy presses his cheek against his shoulder. Wilbur tilts his head slightly, lowering his voice to almost a whisper. Techno watches them, mindlessly braiding his hair, ignoring the way Tommy holds out his hand, trying to tug on it.

“You're doing great,” he says when his son starts repeating his movements himself, a bit hesitantly, clumsy.

But he smiles at him anyway, face tanned and freckled. Wilbur kisses the tip of his nose.

He rests his back against the tree as Fundy scoops more flowers from his lap.

He glances over at Techno, who flips the braid over his back.

Tommy makes another unsuccessful attempt to taste the earth.

“Hey.” Wilbur picks up one flower between his fingers.

Techno turns to him, and Wilbur leans in quickly, slipping the daisy behind his ear.

Techno blinks. Frowns.

“What?” Wilbur laughs as the tip of his nose turns red.

Tommy stares at him with large blue eyes.

He's eerily similar to Phil. So much, someone could easily take him for his son.

Wilbur doesn't think about it for too long.

(He's not sure if it's such a bad thought, after all.)

Tommy puts his hand up.

“What?” Techno pulls him a little closer on his lap. “You want one too?”

Techno looks meaningfully at Wilbur, who’s already handing him a tiny flower.

And Techno, so softly, like Wilbur would never expect from him a few more months, puts it between blond hair.

Tommy raises a hand to it.

“Oh, no, no!” Techno pushes his hands away, ignoring the distinct noises of protest. “We don't eat flowers!”

Tommy puffs out his cheeks.

“Aw, Tommy.” Wilbur leans in, pinches the boy's nose gently between his fingers.

Fundy finishes his crown. A bit clunky, but intact.

He could fall asleep here, Wilbur thinks as he rests his back against the tree.

“Tech.” Fundy waves his hand at Techno.

Techno, a bit puzzled at first, then holding back a smile, bows his head.

Fundy rests the crown in his hair, like it’s the most precious treasure.

“There,” he says, smiling with obvious satisfaction. “Now you’re a real king.”

He could stay here.

“Actually,” Techno asks him the same evening, “why don't you do music anymore?”

Wilbur freezes for a moment. Just for a moment.

Then goes back to already practiced movements, pink curls between his fingers.

He's getting better at it.

In braiding hair, and being honest.

“I stopped after Sally left,” he answers. “And then I just... Couldn’t get back.”

Techno nods.

The night’s a bit chilly, the wood cold under their feet.

Wilbur tries not to think about it.

“I played the guitar,” he adds after a while. “That's why Fundy is called that. After a song.”

“Do you still have a guitar?”

Wilbur shakes his head.

Doesn't explain why. He doesn't think he has to.

When Techno speaks again, Wilbur's already tying the end of his braid.

"I never bought you a birthday present."

Wilbur lets his hair fall onto his back.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

Techno shrugs.

But out of the corner of his eye, Wilbur can clearly see a hint of a smile.

And it is quiet.

Like the calm before the storm.

The storm starts with a scream.

Like thunder, he's woken up from his sleep, with a sharp gasp.

And something's wrong.

Not at first.

At first he just breathes, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

He blinks, getting up on his still sluggish forearms. The cold sheets slide off his shoulders.

He forgot to close the window.

The lights in the hallway are on. And something is wrong. Very wrong. And the thought runs over him like cold sweat, settling heavy in his chest.

Like the first, cold rain.

Like that soft, choked scream.

In the past months, Wilbur thought he got used to it.

To waking up to nightmares. His own and others.

To finding someone else in the kitchen, on the front porch, when it's hard to say whether they got up early or haven't slept at all.

To the fact that maybe not everything was always okay, and maybe it never will. And maybe sometimes all he'll be able to do is stare blankly at his ceiling.

And maybe sometimes the pain was so agonizing it felt like it would never end.

And when he sometimes sat down on the stairs to the house in the middle of the night, his fingers clenched on his shoulders, Techno or Phil would only sit next to him without saying a word, and

maybe it felt a little bit better. That he's not the only one.

Something is definitely wrong now, and he can almost feel it like heavy clouds hanging over them.

He can hear Techno's voice, his quick steps.

He doesn't even try to walk quietly past Fundy's room.

His head still hums, legs buckle under his weight as he stands up abruptly.

“Phil?” He opens the door, squints in the harsh light.

Like the first lightning on the dark sky.

He doesn't like the silence, but the words he hears are certainly not meant for him.

“Hey, hey. Dad. It's alright, just-”

Techno doesn't sound like someone trying to hide from bad weather. Like people throwing jackets and handbags over their heads, sneaking under the nearest roof, hurrying to their cars, more annoyed than anything else.

Techno sounds like someone, who just figured out that the storm will reach him wherever he goes.

Wilbur stops in front of Phil's bedroom, holds his breath.

Techno, sitting on the edge of the bed, turns his head towards him. His hair falls over his shoulders in messy waves.

Wilbur doesn't even look at him.

Phil's sitting on his bed.

Leaning down, hair almost touching his knees. With fingers tight around his shirt. His breathing's shallow, interrupted by quiet sobs.

“Phil...?”

He looks at him, eyes hazy, absent.

Wilbur crouches beside his bed, his knees giving up immediately.

“Wilbur,” his voice's hoarse, shaky. “I'm- *Fuck.*”

He clenches his jaw, hisses softly, sucking air through his teeth.

Wilbur should panic.

He can feel it, the way his throat tightens, the way his hands shake.

But for some reason, he can't.

He knows this.

The way Phil winces, as he takes a breath. The way his fingers tighten against his chest.

Somewhere in the back of his head, some distant memory, recognizes it without hesitation.

This is not his son, who disappeared from his bedroom in the middle of the night. This is not his mother, leaving him a stranger to take care of.

This is not him, rocking a baby in his arms, trying to hold back the tears, staring at one note with those damned, familiar words.

Because this time, the situation is still so overwhelmingly hopeless, that all he can do is exactly what he's supposed to.

Lie down in the wet grass and wait for the storm to pass by.

“Techno.” He can hear his hearts beating in his ears. “Call an ambulance.”

Techno's face is pale, eyes shaky. His hands still hold to Phil's shoulders, more like trying to comfort himself.

Phil looks up.

“No, don't. I just-”

He doesn't finish; his whole face suddenly twists. He clenches his jaw.

“I...” Techno looks at Wilbur. His fingers squeeze his father's shoulders one last time. He steps back, reaching for the bedside table.

Phil shakes his head, though Wilbur isn't sure if it's an actual attempt to protest or an attempt to control his own breathing.

“Hey, Phil.” Wilbur quickly takes Techno's place, barely registering the man talking into a phone. “Everything will be fine.”

He doesn't know how his voice sounds so calm.

He doesn't know how he can keep his hands still enough to unbutton Phil's shirt.

“It's okay. Just breathe.” He helps him lean against the bed frame.

“*Fuck.*”

“I know.” He finds Phil's hand, squeezing it tightly. “You're gonna be okay.”

Phil closes his eyes for a moment.

And when he opens them again, he looks at him like he really wants to believe his words.

Between holding his hand and soft reassurances, it hardly feels real.

It doesn't feel real, when he hears the ambulance in the distance. It doesn't feel real, as the blue light falls on Phil's face. It doesn't feel real when a stranger asks him questions that he answers almost automatically.

The first thing that feels real is a tiny hand, tightening around his fingers.

“Dad.”

Wilbur looks down.

Cold air ruffles Fundy's hair. He shouldn't be outside in his pajamas.

The ambulance still rumbles in his ears.

"He was crying," he says, holding his arms out to him.

Oh.

Oh.

Only now does Wilbur fully register the bundle in his arms; the crying baby breaking through everything else.

He's holding him wrong.

And Tommy seems aware of it as well, squirming in his hold.

They both seem so small.

Wilbur doesn't even feel his knees hitting the cold porch. He only reaches out, taking the baby from his son.

"Oh. Oh, Fundy-"

He looks up.

At his son's sleepy, worried face, trying to peak over his shoulder.

"Grandpa will be fine, right?"

And he looks at him, seems so small and scared, and Wilbur's heart beats a little harder, a little faster.

And all he can do, is pull him a little closer.

Chapter End Notes

this is so sad alexa play heart attack by demi lovado

Thank You For The Music

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The bright light hurts his eyes.

Maybe it's because after a few hours in the hard, plastic chair, everything hurts anyway, especially his hands, still rocking the baby.

(Or maybe it's because he's been holding back tears for a few hours now.)

Although (after at least two hours) Tommy finally stopped crying, he still refuses to sleep. Even after every single lullaby and nursery rhyme Wilbur could think of, trying to drown out the disturbing silence of the hospital.

Maybe Tommy doesn't like the light, too.

Fundy also tries to fight off sleep, with less much success. With his cheek resting on Wilbur's shoulder, knees drawn to chest, he keeps closing his eyes, and opening them with increasing difficulty.

Wilbur's honestly a bit surprised that it took so long. Though, looking at the amount of wrappers left in the empty chair next to them, the amount of sugar in his blood might have something to do with it.

Wilbur would very much like to not give his son diabetes.

But looking at how Techno's still pacing nervously around the hallway, stopping at the vending machine, it's possible that it's what awaits him.

Techno, with an impossible to read face, blurry eyes, mindlessly twisting the rings on his fingers, looks so much like his father it's almost funny.

Almost.

Wilbur hates hospitals.

The first time he found himself in one, he was ten years old, and his appendix burst in the middle of his English class. And tho the vision of skipping the math test that day was very tempting, having only hospital food for at least a week - much less.

This time there was no test. And his mother wasn't sitting beside his bed, slowly petting his hair and face.

He's not the one behind closed doors.

Tommy cries softly, and Wilbur shushes him. Fundy winces as he opens his eyes again.

“You can go to sleep,” Wilbur says gently, but he just shakes his head.

“I don't want to.”

Wilbur turns his head slightly, kissing the top of his head.

A few coins clink in the dimly lit vending machine, and Techno leans in, pulling out another candy. He looks in their direction, but at the sight of Fundy already half asleep, he changes the plan by extending his hand to Wilbur.

“Take it,” he says, voice so firm and serious, Wilbur almost smiles.

“No, thanks,” he shakes his head.

Techno frowns slightly. Out of habit, pushes his hair back.

It's been a while since Wilbur last saw them in such a bad shape. Recently, falling on Techno's back with braids and ribbons, they actually started to resemble hair, rather than a bird nest.

(Wilbur, quietly, takes pride in that.)

“I've already eaten like three,” he says, and Wilbur is willing to believe him on that one. “And I think I'm going to puke.”

He doesn't doubt that either, looking at how pale he is. Wilbur shrugs.

“We're already in a hospital anyway.”

Techno stares at him for a moment.

Then laughs, covering his mouth with his hand. And while he tries, Wilbur also can't stop his shoulders from trembling, causing Fundy to stir up.

Nothing's really funny about it. Neither about their situation, nor what he said.

But for some reason, they still can't stop.

When a moment later, Techno disappears around the corner (looking for either another vending machine or a toilet), Wilbur suddenly remembers something.

He looks at Fundy, still trying hard to fight off his sleepiness.

“You called Phil '*grandpa*'.”

It's more of a statement than a question.

Because in the moment to which Wilbur comes back to in his mind, there's no hesitation.

Neither then nor this time.

Fundy just shrugs.

“Well, your grandparents take care of you, and they're old. And Phil takes care of me, and he's old.”

He says it, like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

And Wilbur can't hide his smile.

The first thing Phil says when he wakes up is:

“Fucking hell, they had better beds in the army.”

And really, all Wilbur can do is laugh.

Maybe because it's so much *like Phil*, that he'd be more surprised if he said anything else.

Maybe because finally, he can breathe a little more, without the constant squeeze of uncertainty, fear.

Or maybe because Phil looks like just crawled through all seven levels of Hell and back, but he's still here.

The monitor next to his bed beats softly. Stable.

He looks from him to Techno with a tired, hazy gaze. And he smiles gently.

“Hi, mate.”

He squeezes his son's hand, and Techno looks like he's scared to move, and he wants to throw his arms around his father and never let go at the same time.

He squeezes it back.

“How are you feeling?” Wilbur asks, sitting carefully on the side of the bed.

The feeling of another boy on the other side of the mattress grounds him in reality.

“Like someone ate me and then threw me up,” Phil answers.

Maybe not the nicest metaphor, but probably the most accurate.

Phil looks a bit down at Fundy, smiles as he stretches out his free hand, petting red hair.

“I told you, you're gonna be the death of me one day. This is what having kids gives you.” He sighs, tapping the tip of Fundy's nose with a finger. “Never have children. Remember that.”

He turns slightly in place, wincing almost immediately.

“Cheap crap.”

He looks up at his son, who now looks like he's three seconds away from a complete breakdown; closes his eyes. Sweaty, blonde hair still sticks to his face.

“What was the sea like yesterday?” He asks, mindlessly twisting a few rings on Techno's fingers.

“Peaceful,” Techno replies, so softly that Wilbur almost misses it. “Good weather for fishing.”

“That's nice.”

Phil takes a slow breath. His fingers relax a bit.

“Dad.” Techno raises his hand higher, to his own chest, voice suddenly much higher. “Why are you talking like you're about to die? You're not dying. I can see your heart beating-”

Phil laughs.

And Wilbur looks up from him, struggling to stop his own smile, and-

Oh.

He doesn't think he ever saw Techno cry before.

And the house just feels empty.

With shoes thrown without consideration next to the door, jackets that no one had the strength to hang up, curtains covering sun falling on the windows.

Messy bed in Phil's room.

(Suddenly, the sunrise doesn't seem so bright.)

Too many chairs in the kitchen. Empty, when they eat in silence.

And in this overwhelming sadness, uncertainty, overbearing fear, Wilbur finds something familiar.

In this deep, this undeniable awareness, that something is wrong. That something is missing.

In how deafening the silence sounds.

In longing, for just one more voice, one more presence.

And just like last time, Wilbur throws himself into it's familiar, suffocating arms.

Mindlessly, with practiced movements, he separates the laundry. Color, white; turns on the washing machine; finds missing socks.

Until there is nothing left to wash.

He unpacks the dishwasher, scrapes the burned pans until the fingers of his hands burn.

Until there are no dirty dishes left.

He collects toys left on the carpet; books, stuffed animals, with a strange tenderness looking for a suitable place on the shelf for everyone.

Until there are no more toys left to collect.

And when there are no more floors left to wash, and the bathroom is already polished, and after he swept the driveway three times already, Wilbur sits down on the couch.

His feet hurt mercilessly, his hands are dry, cuticles bloody.

And he doesn't know what to do with himself.

Through it all, Techno watches him closely. In silence.

(It's too quiet all the time now.)

He spends most of his days in the hospital now; doesn't sleep at night, until the early hours of

morning.

(Wilbur knows, because he can't sleep either.)

And all that's left for Wilbur, is to stick to his assurances. That Phil is feeling better and better, that the doctors are happy with his progress.

Fundy listens to him with wide eyes.

Wilbur lets him awkwardly make the bed in Phil's room, so it'll be ready 'when grandpa comes back'.

Tommy seems to cry more.

(So does Wilbur.)

For a while, they tried to balance it together. Kids, and long hours spend by Phil's bed in the hospital.

They stopped anyway.

(Wilbur came home on weak legs, and Techno held him close as he cried.)

(Phil's bedside monitor gives some sense of comfort. But Phil still looks like he's dying. With his face pale, blank.)

(Wilbur doesn't want to think about it.)

When Techno comes back a little later one day, Wilbur doesn't think anything about it.

Until he actually looks at him and sees the big package in his arms.

“What's that?” His voice sounds oddly hoarse.

Techno shrugs, holds his arms out to him.

Wilbur carefully takes the package from him, tearing the tape, gray paper apart. And then freezes for a while.

He runs his fingers over the shiny wood. Thin, delicate under his hands. Raises his head, swallows.

“No, I can't...” His hands tremble slightly.

Techno's still silent.

“Thank you,” he says again. He steps back a little, clutching his hands together. “But...”

“It's nothing.” Techno's voice sounds quiet, soft. “I found it in the attic. You can take it.”

Wilbur sees the way the guitar reflects light. How the strings are intact, untouched. He can see the way it's all too perfect, all too new. There's a sticker with the store's logo on its side.

Techno wants him to pretend he doesn't.

Wilbur can do that for him.

“It's too quiet here, anyway,” Techno adds.

Wilbur runs his fingers over the strings, listening to their low sounds.

And quietly, he agrees.

That evening, he climbs the windowsill in his bedroom, yellow socks against white wall.

And when he rests his head on the window, he hears himself play the first sounds of a familiar melody.

The sea is calm, and he's playing his guitar again.

“I'm going to see Dream today.”

Wilbur freezes. Water running down his arms, soaking the rolled-up sleeves of his sweater.

Techno doesn't even look at him, staring out the kitchen window, strangely absent.

“Are you serious?” And it's hard to hold back the disappointment in his voice.

“Not for *that*,” Techno snaps.

Wilbur pauses.

Water runs down the sink.

Techno takes a deep breath. Closes his eyes, rubs his nose, fingers running over the pale scar.

“Sorry,” he sighs, and when he finally looks at him, his face seems much softer. “I'm gonna tell him that... I'm done with that.”

“Oh.”

Wilbur looks down at his hands.

Dry, worn down from the last few days.

“Good,” he says slowly. And he hesitates only a moment before adding, “I'm proud of you.”

Techno raises his eyebrows, opening his eyes a little wider. And then just smiles.

But a few hours later, when he opens the door, it's not Techno.

“Wilbur. How are you holding up?”

Niki.

Their smart, wonderful Niki, with pink hair, red face, clutching a plastic container in her hands.

He just stares at her for a moment.

Until he blinks, like woken up from some unpleasant dream. With a cold bucket of water. He shivers.

“Oh. Niki.”

He steps further into the house, opening the door a little wider.

“I didn't want to bother you like that, maybe you wanted to be alone... But I had to make sure you guys aren't starving here.”

She walks inside the kitchen, putting down the container, in which, as he now noticed, she managed to squeeze half of a bakery. Her face seems tight, as she looks around the room.

“Why is it so clean here?”

Wilbur shrugs slowly. He's not sure if she even notices.

“Puffy's worried about... You know.” She clears her throat awkwardly. Almost mindlessly, takes the kettle off the table, pouring water into it. “But I guess it'll be okay, right? Techno told me Mr- I mean *Phil*, is feeling better now. I think it's- Oh.”

She looks at him, for the first time, so closely. Frowns. Her eyebrows are pink now, just like her hair; she probably dyed them.

Wilbur wonders if he could convince Techno to do the same.

“You're wearing my beanie,” she says quietly, a little calmer than a moment before.

Wilbur reaches a hand to his hair.

“Yes,” he replies, tho honestly, he doesn't remember putting it on.

“Why are you wearing a hat inside?”

The light on the kettle dims, steam rising from it. Niki doesn't reach for it.

Wilbur's fingers tighten on the beanie, his hair, feeling his hands tremble.

“I don't know,” he says.

And it sounds so quiet, so insecure, so pathetic.

“I don't know anything anymore.”

Niki's much shorter than him. When she puts her arms around him, the top of her head doesn't even reach his chin.

“Hey, it's okay.” She rests her cheek against the fabric of his sweater.

And her arms suddenly feel oddly hard. He never noticed how strong she really is.

He closes his eyes, clenches his jaw.

“You'll kill the fishes,” she reminds with a soft laugh.

Wilbur's fingers tighten on her sweatshirt.

“I'm not gonna cry.”

And it sounds like a promise.

“How did it go?”

Techno knocks the shoes off his feet. They fall on the floor, heavy. Wilbur fights the urge to straighten them.

For a moment, Techno's just silent, lost in thoughts.

And then he looks at Wilbur.

“He asked if I wanted to be his Best Man.”

Wilbur opens his mouth. Closes them again.

“So... Good?”

Techno, slowly, like still between shock and disbelief, shrugs.

“I think so. I have to buy a suit.”

And all Wilbur says after a pause is:

“Niki brought us cupcakes.”

Chapter End Notes

oh wow, we're actually so close to the end, it feels weird haha
see yall one last time next week, for the final chapter and epilogue!!

For those interested: I have an idea for another ff, so you could say that's 'in work'.
Tho idk when it's comming. Hopefully I'll start uploading it by the end of
December/holiday break! :)

When All Is Said And Done

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Why is it so clean here?”

It's the first thing Phil says, as he walks over the doorstep.

And this time, Wilbur laughs; all flushed face, hands that he doesn't know what to do and strangely hazy eyes.

Techno doesn't let go of Phil's arm, fingers clutched on his father's coat. And in the way he looks at him, how he moves even closer (tho he clearly tries to hide it), is reminiscent of a boy, scared of losing his dad in the store.

“Blame Wilbur,” his voice's firm anyway, as he takes his eyes off Phil for a moment, only to wrinkle his nose at Wilbur. “He's just crazy.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, Mister *I'm gonna sit in the corner contemplating life'*. At least I'm doing something useful.” He takes Phil's coat.

“Yeah. Congratulations on living out your dreams of being a housewife.”

“At least I didn't get kicked out of college.”

“You didn't *go* to college-”

“Good to know I'm still needed for something,” Phil interrupts them. “Like making a mess.”

He kicks off his boots, throwing them against the wall. Right next to all the others, neatly arranged.

“There. That's better.”

And maybe it is.

Because he's finally *home*.

Lots of sleep, lots of medicine and lots of rest. That's what the doctor advised Phil, repeating it so many times, like he wanted to literally engrave it in their minds.

Wilbur thinks that this doctor apparently never had children.

From the moment Phil entered the house, Fundy wouldn't leave him alone, even for a moment. Holding onto the sleeve of his shirt and pants, trailing behind him like a very little, very ginger duck.

And he's not the only one. No matter how much Techno tries to hide it.

“You know I can still walk, right?” Phil says, looking up at his much bigger, pink duckling.

Techno, still holding onto his arm tightly, snorts.

“I’m serious,” Phil insists. “I’m not made of glass.”

And to prove his point, he takes his arm away, sinking on the couch in the living room. He immediately regrets it, grimacing and putting a hand to his back.

Techno turns to Wilbur, arms outstretched in silent outrage.

Fundy quickly climbs onto the couch, sitting cross-legged next to Phil, who mindlessly ruffles his hair.

Though Phil’s definitely recovering, Wilbur still feels the strange tightness in his throat, when he looks at the dark spots beneath his eyes.

Maybe Phil isn’t made of glass.

But Wilbur isn’t going to pretend, he doesn’t think of him that way now.

Tiny hand hits him softly in the face. He looks down at Tommy squirming in his arms.

“What?” Tommy stretches his arms towards Techno, babbling something probably understandable only to him. “You want Techno?”

After everything, Tommy still looks a bit clumsy in Techno’s arms. Too stiff, like he’s afraid that even the slightest movement might hurt him, torn between trying to protect his hair from tiny hands and the fear of dropping the baby.

“Oh, come on. Stop that.”

Techno sits down on the ground, bringing the baby close to his chest.

Wilbur looks from him to Fundy, legs thrown over Phil’s lap, and he’s only a surprised to discover that it feels... *Right*. Like pieces from different puzzles, thrown awkwardly into one box but still forming, maybe a bit abstract, but a whole picture.

It’s a strange thought.

But this one time, Wilbur doesn’t want to throw it aside.

He sits down on the couch, pulling Fundy closer, kissing the tip of his nose. Fundy grimaces at him.

“Dad, *stop*-”

“I’ll miss this,” Wilbur confesses softly, sighing. He runs his hand over his son’s forehead, brushing red hair aside.

Fundy frowns.

“What?”

“You.” He laughs softly. “Being so small.”

“I'm not small at all!” Fundy protests almost immediately. Wilbur pulls him closer, resting his cheek on top of his head, as if to prove a point.

“You will,” Phil says suddenly, looking at Wilbur with something nostalgic. “You don't even know how much.”

Techno looks up at them, frowning.

“It's not like I'm dead, you know?”

Phil laughs, leaning forward, reaching to his son.

“Oh, I know. But you don't let me fuss over you anymore.” His fingers pinch Techno's, making him wince. “See? That's what I'm talking about.”

He sighs softly, looking down.

“But now I have Tommy, right?”

Tommy, now distracted from his important task of trying to eat his plush cow, looks up at him with big eyes. Phil kneels on the floor, picking him up.

“Tommy lets me fuss over him as much as I want, right, honey?”

Tommy hums, reaching for Phil's long earring. He laughs, as the man kisses the tip of his nose.

Wilbur feels like something warm melts in his chest.

“My little champion...” Wilbur combs through Fundy's hair with his fingers.

Techno glares at him, grimacing even more.

“Now you're really acting like Father.”

“Good,” Phil adds cheerfully, planting a kiss on Tommy's cheek. “Someone will have to replace me when I... You know.”

Suddenly it's quiet.

Phil shifts Tommy in his arms, looking from Techno to Wilbur. And then at Fundy, who suddenly seems very close to crying.

“Too soon?” He asks softly.

Wilbur nods.

“Oops.”

They're silent for a moment.

Techno stares at his father's hands, rough and scarred.

“Dad?”

Phil looks at him in the same, gentle way as always.

“I...,” he swallows. “I quit my *job*.”

Phil straightens slowly.

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” He rubs his neck with his hand. “And I think I need to buy a suit.”

Phil stares at him for a moment.

And then he smiles, wide, and suddenly he's the one looking weirdly close to crying.

Later that evening, he finds both of them asleep on the couch, TV softly humming in the background.

Techno, with his cheek resting on his father's shoulder, bare feet tucked up on the pillows, curtain bangs falling awkwardly over his eyelids, face flushed - looks weirdly younger.

And suddenly, he's not a man who used to beat up people for money, whose boots seem to weigh more than all Wilbur, who could probably lift him up with one hand.

But only a boy, who almost lost his dad.

Wilbur pulls a blanket over them and mindlessly tucks a loose lock of pink hair behind Techno's ear.

And somehow, in the time spent trying to stop Phil from giving himself another heart attack, arguing over the doctor's orders and the supposed level of intelligence of the same doctor, the last days of August pass by.

And the first weeks of September.

And suddenly, amidst all this, concern and fear and relief and *everything* at once, September turns into October, and the leaves on the tree in their garden lose their green color.

Wilbur watches them every day, the deep orange turned crimson, till the first one fall at his feet, and he still says nothing.

He says nothing about how much they already overstayed their welcome, or how nobody else seems to even notice.

It's a scary thought. When he realizes, he doesn't really want them to start noticing.

He's not sure at what point *'this house'* turned into one, simple: *'home'*.

Maybe then, he just dismissed the thought, pushing it down somewhere in the back of his head.

When he braided Techno's hair, when he helped Fundy climb the tree in the garden, when he rocked Tommy gently to sleep, when he listened to the sound of the sea outside the window, when he played his guitar softly, head leaning against the wall.

Or maybe there was no real '*point*', maybe the feeling came slowly, like autumn changing the colors of its leaves. Slow, but inevitable.

He doesn't know when the walls of his room stopped feeling so empty. When they became a place to breathe, just for a moment, where he could bury himself in his sheets and hide from the world like a little kid.

He doesn't know when Techno and Phil suddenly stopped being just strangers. Wilbur realizes, that he would call them *family*.

And maybe, that's the scariest part of it all. The fact that he doesn't want to leave anymore. He's not ready to let go of the only good thing that has happened to him since he first held a Fundy in his arms.

He doesn't know what he's scared of most. The question, or the answer.

He feels the familiar grip, the way his fingers tighten, the way his chest breathes a little harder when he knocks on the door.

A soft murmur answers.

“Tech?” He leans out from behind the ajar door. “Are you busy?”

Techno doesn't look up, leaning in the chair next to his desk.

“Dream sent this... Invitation. Or something.” He spins in his chair, showing him the letter. “Oh, and you're invited to the wedding, by the way.”

“Oh.” Wilbur bites his lip, noticing the "*Techno 'Blade' Minecraft with Family*", carefully handwritten at the top of the paper. “But I...”

“That's not a question.” Techno just waves his hand. “You think I can stand Dream's friends all alone?”

Suddenly, the easy smile disappears from his lips. He frowns.

“Hey, is everything okay?”

Wilbur nervously shifts from his heels to toes, looks away.

“I wanted to talk about something. But if you're busy-”

“I'm not.” He says. Firm, leaving no room for discussion.

Wilbur slowly sits down on the bed, smooths the sheets with his hands.

“What did you want to talk about?”

Techno looks at him, like he's scared that Wilbur would suddenly just run away.

Which might not be such a bad idea, after all. An open window has never looked so tempting.

“Well, I've been looking at... At house prices.”

Techno stops, one hand hovering in the air.

“Okay?” He replies slowly, looking away.

He clenches his jaw tight, and suddenly Wilbur feels even confident than he did a moment ago.

“And I noticed...” He nervously runs his fingers through his hair. “That apartments are well... Now they go for quite a lot. Especially renovated.”

“And?”

“And I thought that maybe... You know, it would be a good... Investment.”

He stares at his feet, biting down on his lip.

Techno doesn't answer for quite a while.

A long, *goddamn long* while. And with every passing second, Wilbur's heart beats harder against his chest.

“Hey?”

Wilbur looks up. And he doesn't know if it's more of a relief or surprise, that Techno smiles. Wide, like he just heard a very funny joke.

“If you are asking if you can move in here permanently, I think you already know the answer.”

Wilbur wants to sigh with relief, let go of all the tension at last. He wants to laugh.

In result, he does something in between. He tilts his head back, closes his eyes for a moment.

Something warm settles in his chest. Something good. Something to *keep*.

“You know, If you left now, you would probably break Phil's heart for a second time.”

Wilbur smiles slightly.

“Yeah, we don't want that.”

And while Techno laughs, something about the way he glances away, the way he grips his fingers a little tighter on the desk, makes Wilbur frown.

“You're okay?”

“Yeah,” he nods, though doesn't seem very convinced himself. “Just...”

He sighs softly, covering his mouth with his hand.

Wilbur stays silent, letting him pull himself together. He pretends not to notice how Techno's eyes suddenly seem strangely wet.

“I know it's fine now. And I know it's gonna be fine, but... It's stupid.” He nervously pushes a loose strand of hair behind his ear. “I'm not a kid anymore. But I guess I'm still not ready to... Live without him.”

He winces at his own words, but Wilbur just shakes his head.

“It's not stupid. I think that's quite normal.”

Techno freezes momentarily, pink hair twisted around his finger. He blushes; looks away.

“Sorry. I forgot-”

“Nah, it's okay.” He shrugs; hooks his fingers around a loose thread on his sweater. “You know, me and my mother... We weren't exactly close. And still...” He raises his head, so he can look Techno in the eye. “I can't even imagine how... It must have been scary for you.”

For me it was.

Techno, slowly, nods.

“I owe *Dad* a lot,” he almost whispers, face softens.

And in that one word, so rare in his mouth, there's so much gratitude and devotion. Wilbur raises his head; watches Techno tap an unfamiliar rhythm on his desk with his fingers.

“My parents died, at the end of The War, shortly after I was born. But...” He pauses for a moment; reaches his face almost mindlessly, running his fingertips over the pale scar. “I don't really remember them. And then I met my father. He took me in when no one else would. Raised me like his own.”

He looks at Wilbur and for a moment, they're just silent: a quiet agreement to respect a fragile moment.

Techno tilts his head. His smile seems only a little forced.

“You do know something about that, don't you?”

Wilbur stops for a moment, rubbing the sleeve of his sweater between his fingers.

“What do you mean?”

Techno looks away; he seems almost embarrassed, unsure of his next words. In the end, he only hums, and the usual, indifferent look returns to his face.

“Well, I mean, you don't actually think that Fundy is *your* son, do you?”

Wilbur bites his lip.

“He is my son. But...”

Techno takes a step beyond that line of mutual silence. Things they don't talk about, things they don't ask. Still too painful, too real to be shared.

And now he stands, waiting for Wilbur to push him back, to put back that wall he was building around himself for years.

But that wall doesn't exist anymore. Not with Techno.

Instead, Wilbur tells him honestly:

“Sally was cheating on me, before she got pregnant.”

Techno's face doesn't change. And in all this stability and certainty, it gives him the strength to finally throw off the burden he was carrying over the past years.

“We never talked about it. But I think she knew, that I knew.”

Her dark hair, her eyes, her smile, the phone she flipped over when he looked over her shoulder, the cuff links he found under their couch.

“Why didn't you say anything?”

Techno's voice's calm, monotonous, but filled with that masked concern that Wilbur started to recognize long ago. But the question he asks has no answer. And even if it does, Wilbur doesn't know it.

“I don't know. I guess... I was afraid of losing her.” He looks down at his feet. “And I did. Only later.”

Techno hums. He stops nervously in front of Wilbur, then sits down next to him on the bed. He rests his hand on his shoulder.

Techno's hand's warm and heavy, keeping him grounded.

“I know I'm not Fundy's *father*, Techno, I'm not stupid. But I can still be his *dad*.”

Techno smiles and his face softens. He pulls him a little closer.

“Maybe that's why Phil likes you so much,” he says suddenly. “You do have a lot in common.”

And maybe they really do.

Wilbur watches Phil calmly rock Tommy to sleep.

“I really missed it,” Phil says suddenly, gently brushing the blond hair. “Techno's lucky. If it weren't for you, I would probably start demanding grandkids from him.”

Wilbur laughs. And suddenly, before he can really stop himself, he says:

“Fundy called you 'grandpa'.”

He closes his mouth immediately, feeling his hands clench a little tighter; nails dig into the skin.

Phil stops. Just for a moment.

And then the lazy smile returns to his face, much warmer and more nostalgic.

“I know. He called me that before.”

“Oh.” Wilbur straightens up a bit, maybe only a little surprised.

“Yeah.” Phil brushes the hair from his forehead with his free hand; leans down slightly to kiss the top of his head. “Doesn't bother me.”

They don't talk about what Techno said.

They don't talk about it, when a few weeks later, a few more suitcases appear in Wilbur's and

Fundy's room.

They don't talk about it when Wilbur, one evening, slips an old photo between the pages of their old album: himself, and a little boy in his arms.

And maybe, they don't have to.

Chapter End Notes

One last 'plot twist' at the end, tho it was probably obvious, I'm still not very good at that lol

Techno's full name is Techno Minecraft yes, I do think it's kind of funny (Blade is a nickname tho)

Oh god we're almost done this feels weird lmao
See yall one last time this sunday for a short epilogue!

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Spring comes with rain.

Which, after months of constant cold, wind blowing in his eyes, freezing his eyelashes and breath, Wilbur greatly appreciates, as warm drops trickle down his skin.

And after the rain comes the sun, falling hot on his face and hair.

He breathes deep, stretching a little more on the warm blanket under his back.

“Well, I wouldn't be so sure.” A large shadow covers the sun for a moment.

He wrinkles his nose, long hair tickles his face; opens one eye and pushes Techno's shoulder.

“Get lost. I would make a great wolf.”

“More like a snail,” he teases, nudging Wilbur's oversized limbs with his foot. “Or a sheep.” He pats Wilbur's blue sweater. “A blue one.”

“And you'd be a stupid pig.” He holds out his hand, but Techno pulls away before he can pull on his hair.

“And *I* want to be a fox!” Fundy interrupts, sitting down next to his father.

His hands and face flushed with red, breathing rapid, and hair covered with leaves. Techno leans in, gently shaking them off his red hair.

“You can be anything you want,” Wilbur assures him, pausing halfway to yawn.

“And Tommy could be a raccoon!” Fundy pints to the boy, seated on Phil's lap.

Tommy, as if realizing that they're talking about him, puffs out his cheeks. Wilbur laughs.

“Surprisingly accurate.” He stands up, tapping Tommy's nose with his finger. “Right? He's already acting like he was raised in garbage.”

Phil makes a particularly offended noise, as he pulls the boy closer.

“Don't talk to him like that!” He hisses, though Tommy still reaches out to his brother, blissfully unaware of his insult to his dignity.

“It's like I can ruin him more,” he mumbles.

Phil shifts Tommy in his arms, kissing him on top of the head.

“You're still on about that?”

“Yes. I'm still mad at you.”

And while Tommy's first words will forever remain as *'fuck'* (repeated almost flawlessly right after Phil), the culprit himself just rolls his eyes.

“You should be packing,” he says, looking from Wilbur to his son. “And not discussing who's a pig and who's not.”

“None of us would be a pig, except Techno,” Wilbur corrects him quickly. “And don't rush me. Sam says I should do things at my own pace.”

Sam, his new therapist, says a lot of things.

And sometimes, Wilbur tries to listen.

“Also...!”

He turns to his son, suddenly grabbing his waist.

Fundy lets out a screech, quickly fading into laughter, as his father pulls him onto his lap, kissing him on the cheek.

“Maybe it would be easier to pack, if someone would stop stealing my stuff.”

Fundy pulls the oversized shirt over his knees even tighter, shaking his head.

Techno's pink eyebrows narrow for a moment, and a familiar smile appears on his face.

“Yeah, dad, you're probably already packed, aren't you? Eager to see your fiancée?”

“She's not my fiancée,” Phil hisses. But right after, his face turns red, and he leans in, trying to hide behind his hair. “Not yet. She didn't say yes.”

“Because you didn't ask,” Wilbur reminds him. “She's just waiting for it, trust me. If you don't hurry, she'll do it herself.”

He knows it's true. In every second him and Kristin had a chance to talk on the phone, in every letter she started writing to him and Techno, you could feel her constant *yearning*.

“Well, that's what I'm going for, innit? Give me a fucking break,” he sighs, slumping harder in his chair.

And winces, as Tommy repeats the most vulgar part.

Fundy, suddenly clearly interested in their conversation, looks up from a particularly interesting bug.

“Grandpa's getting married?”

“It's not-”

“Yup!” Wilbur interrupts him immediately, with a very smug look on his face. He rests his chin on his son's hair. “You'll get to know her when, after we're done with mountains. She lives in America, you remember where America is, right?”

“Yep!”

And while Phil's still pretending to be offended, a hint of a smile flashes across his face.

Love' is a strong word, Wilbur thinks.

One of those reserved for only a few.

For the sea breeze, as the salty water flows over his ankles, and he tilts his head back, looking up at the stars.

For flowers growing on fields, in the garden in front of their house, decorating the greenery with small spots of color.

For the soft music that flows from his strings as he plays his guitar at night, for his brother and the moon.

For his son.

But now, on one lazy spring afternoon, Wilbur quietly wants to believe there's still room for a few more.

Chapter End Notes

Wow can't believe we're actually here at the end! Officially the longest ff I've ever written (previous record was 17k so u know lmao)

Thanks for all the comments and support, I really appreciate it! It was nice seeing familiar pfp every week :)

U can find me @alwerakoo on Tumblr, I don't really use any other social media

Next fic is a... Vague idea in my head and my finals are approaching so idk how that's gonna go lmao. But maybe during winter break I'll try to crank something up!

Thanks for sticking around! :)

End Notes

-this work was translated from another language, so please let me know if you spot any mistakes/anything sounds weird

-our universe, not our timeline (mentions of a fictional war). ambiguous time frame

-all the chapter titles (except the 1st one) are ABBA songs. this is purely for aesthetic reasons, most songs don't actually match the tone of this ff

-you can find me on tumblr @alwerakoo

-check out [those](#) amazing [fanart](#) Nyxrsh made!! Go follow her, she's great!!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!